

PREACHING SOCIAL JUSTICE

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To my wife, Anne

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PREACHING SOCIAL JUSTICE

Abstract

This project is a study focusing on effectively preaching social justice. The research is centered around preparation and analysis of a series of four sermons on social justice. An attempt was made to demonstrate to the congregation that social justice is a central theme or one of the core ideas running throughout the whole Bible. Particular emphasis is placed on the preaching of the prophets and Jesus' ministry of preaching and teaching.

A cross-section of the researcher's congregation was asked questions before the sermon series began, after each of the four social justice sermons, and after the whole series had been completed. Based on this feedback a determination was made as to whether there was a discernable difference in the audience's opinions on why people are poor and if there is a discernable change in the person's intention to take part in works of compassion and efforts to change structural injustice.

In addition, the researcher determined from the surveys that there was an increase in the respondents' ability to identify biblical texts that address social justice and an increase in their ability to apply biblical social justice to local, national, and global issues. The project showed that discernable differences in attitudes about social justice and willingness to work for social justice resulted from the series of sermons.

CHAPTER ONE

PREACHING JUSTICE: DEFINING THE PROBLEM

Many Christians recognize Jesus' words evidencing his concern for the poor: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." (Matthew 25:35-36). A considerable number of middle-class congregations need to be reminded in a graceful way that one day we will be asked if we did all these things. Some sitting in the pews may not want to hear this message and preachers may be tempted to avoid prophetic preaching. The preacher who yields to this temptation will in the long run be doing the listeners a disservice. "The minister has been called by the congregation literally to 'minister' to the gospel itself, as the word upon which the community depends: he is called to *tend* (italicized in original) the life of the gospel in the congregation, to care for its vivacity and authenticity."¹

Jim Wallis has chronicled in *God's Politics* both the difficulty and the crucial need for a prophetic application of faith to politics. Wallis tells that few of his seminary classmates ever heard a sermon on social justice issues.² Preachers feeling the call to preach on poverty must overcome cynicism from those in the pews. Wallis attributes a seemingly fatalistic and indifferent attitude towards the poor to a basic misunderstanding

¹ Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jesnon, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1976), 119.

² Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), xxii-xxiv.

of Jesus' words. "For you will always have the poor with you..." (Mark 14:7) does not mean we that we should accept poverty as inevitable. The critical difference between Jesus' disciples and a middle-class church is precisely this: our lack of proximity to the poor."³ The black church has much to teach mainline and evangelical churches about fearlessly preaching social justice issues. James Childs, Jr. Professor of Systematic Theology at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, notes "that in African-American preaching, theology and church life there has never been a divide between salvation and concern for justice."⁴

This project will examine some of the factors that may make ministers reluctant to preach on social justice issues. Factors include complex economic issues and a particular course of action may produce unintended consequences. Pastors often feel pressure to emulate the growing mega-churches that frame much of the religious life in metropolitan areas by avoiding social justice issues.⁵ A thesis of this project is the critical need for preaching on social justice. There is not enough of it in middle-class churches. Catholic scholars identified the need for preaching on social justice "which was somehow not being heard from 20,000 Catholic pulpits each Sunday morning."⁶ Father Walter J. Burghardt, S.J., started a project called *Preaching the Just Word*.⁷ The focus of these Catholic preaching workshops is to instill in participants "the biblical attachment to the poor and victimized so that lives will be changed. They will preach the partnership of

³ Wallis, *God's Politics*, 211.

⁴ James Childs, Jr., *Preaching Social Justice: The Ethical Vocation of Word and Sacrament Ministry* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000), 41.

⁵ On reluctance to preach on economics see, Philip Wogaman, *Speaking the Truth in Love: Prophetic Preaching to a Broken World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), quoted in James Childs, Jr. , *Preaching Social Justice*, 59. On the failure of the mega-churches to preach prophetically see, Tony Campolo, *Wake Up America: Answering God's Call While Living in the Real World* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991.) pp.114-116.

⁶ Robert F. Drinan, S.J., "Preaching Social Justice in Homilies," *America*, (February 12, 2001): 23.

faith with a deeper conviction.”⁸ It is the intention that this Doctor of Ministry project on preaching social justice will motivate and better equip preachers to effectively preach biblical social justice.

An objective of this project is to help preachers accept the biblical call to prophetically preach social and economic justice sermons and to accept the possible risks involved. Since these issues can be national in scope preachers have to be prepared to have their patriotism questioned. James Forbes, senior minister at Riverside Church in New York, tells how he came to his own personal terms with the call of the prophet to confront. “Now, at last, I know that I am not unpatriotic when I dare to tell the truth to my nation. I am prophetically patriotic when I challenge the evils of the gap between the haves and have nots...”⁹

This writer intends to use the biblical prophets as a positive role model for fearlessly preaching social justice. This current project will stress the need to courageously speak the prophetic truth and to do so with discernment. Obrey Hendricks, of New York Seminary, defines the role of the prophetic preacher and the need to daringly speak the truth in love. “The core of prophecy [is] critiquing the injustices, the wrong-headedness, the political and social ills bedeviling the social order. Look at what the prophets did. They used good judgment, they weren’t reckless, but they didn’t count the cost.”¹⁰ This thesis project aims to lift up the need for a pulpit approach that is boldly

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ James Forbes, “Prophesy to My People” in *I Have a Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Future of Multicultural America*, ed. James Echols (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 2004.), 93.

¹⁰ Obrey Hendricks, “The Prophetic Imperative: Reclaiming the Gospel by Speaking the Truth to Power,” in *Blow the Trumpet in Zion! Global Vision and Action for the 21st Century Black Church*, ed. Iva E. Carruthers, Fredrick D. Haynes III and Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 20005), 82.

prophetic, at times counterculture and always independent of any influence except God's word for justice.

This project intends to prove that not only is boldness needed but also discernment and humility. This researcher intends to demonstrate by audience feedback that social justice preaching is more effective when the preacher acknowledges her/his own struggles with these issues. Pastor J. Alfred Smith stresses the need to "preach with anguish rather than anger. People accept a challenge if they are spoken to in humility and love, and with a broken and burdened heart."¹¹

This project intends to show that a preacher needs sensitivity to the perspectives of the audience hearing social justice sermons. This research plans to show the complexities of the social justice issues and help preachers to present a balanced but not oversimplified approach to the subject. Ronald J. Sider, President of Evangelicals for Social Action, points out the drastically different ways that political liberals and conservatives analyze the causes of poverty. Sider asks:

Who is right? Both are partly right. I have lived and worshipped with the poor far too long to side with the liberal who quickly dismisses the way personal choices contribute to poverty or with the conservative who ignores the way complicated structural barriers make it difficult for many hard working people to escape poverty.¹²

The causes of poverty will be discussed in detail in the review of the literature and the biblical and theological section of this work. This investigator expects to find that preaching effectively on poverty and other social justice issues will be more effective

¹¹ J. Alfred Smith, "Preaching and Social Concerns," in *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching*, ed. Michael Duduit (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 82.

¹² Ronald J. Sider, *Just Generosity: A New Vision for Overcoming Poverty* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 35.

with an understanding of the local context as well as the conflicting opinions held by church listeners.

This thesis will cover in chapter two the biblical foundation for preaching social justice. For example, the prophets of the Old Testament had no reluctance to preach God's word of justice. Amos spoke God's just word without pandering to his audience. He let them know that God despised their ostentatious worship, expensive offerings and pretentious music. Instead, God speaking through the prophet called for justice. "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream" (Amos 5:24). Bryant L. Myers, who has worked globally for justice, points out that none of us are excused from doing justice. We are called to seek a just world in Jesus' name. "Clearly, no one among us is exempt from the command 'to do justice and to walk humbly' with God (Micah 6:8)." ¹³He offers insights from Christian-development practitioners, those who walk and work with the poor throughout the world.

This thesis will document that biblical justice involves concern for the most vulnerable and marginalized in society. Particular emphasis will be placed on the prophets and the teachings of Jesus. This researcher will attempt to demonstrate both corporate and individual dimensions of justice and their connectedness. In addition, this writer intends to show that biblical justice is rooted in God's creation and that the significance of the fall of humanity must be taken seriously including the existence of evil. An important aspect of chapter one will be presenting biblical support for the thesis that the preaching of justice is part of the whole council of Scripture. This will lay a foundation for the principle to be developed in chapter one and subsequent chapters that

¹³ Bryant L. Myers, ed., *Working with the Poor: New Insights and Learnings from Development Practitioners* (Monrovia: World Vision, 1999), 163.

social justice preaching needs to be done in a holistic, balanced, non-ideological and non-manipulative manner in order to be truly prophetic

Chapter two will explore the contemporary theological discussion of social justice and attempt to demonstrate that social-justice preaching is a major part of Christian proclamation. Various understandings of social justice and of bringing about social justice will be examined. Different theological perspectives and ways of thinking about justice and its economic, political and moral dimensions will be analyzed

Chapter three will focus on contemporary discussions of preaching social justice. This will demonstrate the need for social-justice preaching as well as central principles for doing so effectively. Major works will be examined in order to motivate, equip, and guide parish pastors to confidently preach on social-justice issues.

Chapter four will show in detail the methodology to be employed. This will include a series of sermons to be preached at this researcher's congregation. This will include a pretest or survey to determine the future audience's understanding of social justice and their attitude towards dimensions of social justice that will be addressed in the series of sermons. Following each sermon and the entire series of sermons, surveys and a feedback session will be held to assess the effect of the sermons on participants. This researcher will be testing his thesis that effective preaching on social-justice issues can transform people's attitudes. If the listener feels that the preaching is partisan, not balanced or abrasive, then the sermons may be counterproductive. It could harden hearts and cause people to be defensive and resistant to the sermons.

Chapter five will be a summary of this researcher's findings and conclusions. It will determine if the social justice preaching was effective in changing people's attitudes

by not only surveying what they verbally respond but by documenting what they have done or promised to at the end of the series of sermons. What worked and what didn't work will be examined in order to be a resource to preachers. This will guide present and future clergy in preaching social-justice issues effectively while avoiding pitfalls that could contribute to ineffectiveness.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL FOUNDATION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Biblical justice is anchored in divine creation and humanity's fall and the existence of evil must be taken seriously. Genesis 1 tells us that after each phase of creation "God saw that it was good." Finally, after God created humankind in his image and had completed the work of creation, our creator was pleased. "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed it was very good" (Genesis 1:31). Obviously, something went wrong. Cornelius Plantinga, Jr writes that the prophets dreamed of the days when God would make things good again:

The webbing together of God, humans and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call *shalom*. We call it peace but it means much more far more than peace of mind or a cease-fire between enemies. In the Bible, shalom means *universal flourishing, wholeness and delight*—a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts are fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights. Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be.¹⁴

After God determined that what he created was very good things did not stay that way for long. God commanded Adam not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He could eat all he wanted from any other tree in the garden. Then temptation came. Temptation came in the form of "did God say" as the serpent questioned Eve. The serpent twisted God's word. "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" (Genesis 3:1). Dietrich Bonhoeffer focuses on the serpent's subtleness. He notes the tempter spins God's word rather than tempting Eve to defy God:

The serpent's question was a thoroughly religious one. But with the first religious question in the world evil has come on the scene. When evil appears in its godlessness it is powerless, it is a bogey, we do not need to fear it. In this form it does not concentrate its power but diverts us from the other places where it really desires to break through. And here it is wrapped in the garment of righteousness. The wolf in sheep's clothing. Satan in an angel's form of light: this is the shape appropriate to evil. 'Did God say?' this is clearly a religious question.¹⁵

Haddon Robinson reminds us in a sermon on Genesis 3:1-6 that:

When Satan comes to you he does not come in the form of a coiled snake. He does not approach with the roar of a lion. He does not come with the wail of a siren. He does not come waving a red flag. Satan simply slides into your life. When he appears he seems almost like a comfortable companion. There is nothing about him that you would dread. The New Testament warns that he dresses as an angel of light, a servant of God, a minister of righteousness. One point seems clear: when the enemy attacks you, he wears a disguise. As Mephistopheles says in *Faust*, 'The people do not know the devil is there even when he has them by the throat.'¹⁶

Bonhoeffer argues that the fall was not caused by human freedom. What Adam had to rely on when he faced temptation from Satan was God's word. Adam fell when he listened to the tempter. "'Has God really said?' By this question all flesh comes to fail."¹⁷ Bonhoeffer puts temptation in a Christocentric perspective "Only against the backdrop of Jesus' temptation can we understand the meaning of temptation."¹⁸ He considers all three of Satan's temptations of Jesus, recorded in Matthew 4, to be about the word of God. "They are attempts to separate Jesus from God's word. Only by God's word is temptation overcome."¹⁹ Walter Bouman, a Lutheran systematic theologian, stresses that temptation comes in all kinds of ways. But it is always an assault on our call, our

¹⁴ Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995.), 10.

¹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Interpretation of Genesis 1-3*. (London and Southampton: SCM Press, 1959.), 67.

¹⁶ Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Sermons: How Twelve Preachers Apply the Principles of Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1989.), 69.

¹⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Temptation* (London: SCM Press, 1961.) p.16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

discipleship. What is really tempted is Jesus' messianic call. "Jesus is tempted by Satan to be the opposite of the cross. Jesus the messiah, the risen lord of history will have the final word not the tempter. Jesus will not yield to temptation and abandon his messianic call."²⁰

Original Sin

The doctrine of original sin helps to explain why the world is *not the way it's supposed to be*. Original sin also highlights the critical need for justice in today's broken world. Gary Anderson views Genesis 1-3 and the doctrine of original sin through Christ-colored glasses. "The story of human beginnings is only intelligible *in light of the end*."²¹ In an age in which some liberal theologians scoff at the "Adamic myth" and dismiss the doctrine of original sin, Anderson considers the Genesis account central to salvation history. He argues that "the affirmation of God's mercy that defines the very ground of human existence is founded on the basis of Adam's sin and redemption."²² The biblical scholar stresses the continued importance of the concept of original sin. He maintains that rejecting the doctrine of original sin because you question the historicity of the Genesis account is flawed interpretation. For him the point of the biblical narrative is that all humanity lives under God's mercy. "Forgiveness and grace are not arbitrary moments in the lives of the species *homo sapiens*. They are the very center point around which all creation turns--- and flourishes. *This is the teaching of original sin*."²³

²⁰ Dr. Walter Bouman, telephone interview by the author, August 20, 2002.

²¹ Gary A. Anderson, "Necessarium Adae Peccatum: The Problem of Original Sin" in Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, ed., *Sin, Death and the Devil* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 22.

²² Ibid., 44.

²³ Ibid., 44.

Landon Gilkey finds that many liberal theologians have rediscovered the centrality of the Genesis account of creation and the fall. Consequently some have adapted the classical understanding of the doctrine of original sin. Gilkey's own personal encounter with the real life impact of original sin can be found in the literature survey.²⁴

Gilkey in *Message and Existence* concludes that those modern theologians who are dismissive of the historicity of the fall and of original sin being transmitted by lust still seek to use the biblical account and doctrine of original sin in a symbolic manner.²⁵ He finds in the account of Adam and Eve a reminder "of the prior 'sin' of unbelief, of lack of trust, the rebellion against God by making the self the center of its world, that is the root of sin."²⁶ He concludes that sin is passed down from generation to generation by the community itself. The potential for the demonic is ever present despite those who make the doctrine of progress almost an ideology:

Perhaps the unique insight of a Christian interpretation of the human predicament is first, that only God is God, and, second, as a consequence, all else, even the most creative aspect of our human existence, are not absolutely good, good in themselves, but possess the possibility of the demonic if they are made self-sufficient and central.²⁷

In examining the root causes of injustice, evil, and sin itself, it is worth noting the loss of the concept of the devil in much of mainline Christian dialogue. Carl Braaten, one of the most distinguished Lutheran theologians, laments that many modern theologians would like to jettison the concept of the devil. "The idea that there exists a negative personal agent at the heart of radical evil, effectively active in all dimensions within and

²⁴ For an extensive discussion and analysis of original sin as experienced in a Japanese internment camp in wartime China see Landon Gilkey, *Shantung Compund: The Story of Men and Women Under Pressure* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).

²⁵ Landon Gilkey, *Message and Existence: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Seabury Press, 1979), 134.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

²⁷ See generally chapter 6, *The Human Predicament: Estrangement and Sin*.

upon human experience, is widely considered a relic of antiquated mythology that no one believes anymore except those awful fundamentalists.”²⁸ He feels this is a major mistake. “You cannot rip the devil out of theology or teaching because it is rooted in scripture and tradition. To do so would lead us to the false premise that we can turn to a source such as experience or ideology, which would be sheer sophistry.”²⁹

The Way Things Should Be

We have tried to show that the world is *not the way it's supposed to be*. Now we turn to why we should seek social justice and work to make things *the way they are supposed to be*. Glenn H. Stassen and David P. Gushee base their rationale for Christian social justice on Jesus. These evangelical scholars do not survey in depth the Old Testament call for justice. Instead, they stress Jesus' personifying in his life and ministry the prophet Isaiah's four themes in his call for social justice:

Jesus died for our sins, including our injustice. His confronting injustice of the powerful was a major reason why they wanted him crucified. When we see his concern for justice—for an end to unjust economic structures, unjust domination, unjust violence and unjust exclusion from community---we cannot help but rethink our entire picture of what Jesus was about in his preaching and teaching. We cannot help but think that if he was that committed to justice in his context, we are required to be just as concerned about justice in our own.³⁰

Much of our reason for hope for the future comes from the writings of the Old Testament, especially the prophets who envisioned a day when God's call for justice would be fulfilled. “But let justice roll down, like waters, and righteousness like and

²⁸ Carl Braaten, “Powers in Conflict: Christ and the Devil,” in Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, ed., *Sin, Death and the Devil* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000.), 94.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 96.

³⁰ Glenn H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downers: InterVarsity Press, 2003), pp.345-346.

everflowing stream” (Amos 5:24). Before turning to Jesus’ fulfillment of the Old Testament, it will be necessary to examine the earlier testament’s understanding of justice.

Stassen and Gushee argue that we *skip* (author’s emphasis) over the centrality of the Bible’s call for justice despite the words for justice being used at least 1,060 times. This makes it possible for ideologies claiming to be Christian to *hop* (author’s emphasis) in and fill the void. Marxism calls for the rule of the proletariat while others look to market-driven economics or other concepts that can be disguised as Christian solutions to injustice. “None of these is adequate to communicate the word of God in the biblical teaching of delivering community-restoring justice and righteousness.”³¹ The authors see the non-biblical understanding of justice being compared to Christian love. Soon justice becomes an abstraction when it is uprooted from its biblical context and application:

They come to have no defense against the secular ideologies that fill the vacuum and seduce them into unjust practices. They become unbiblical and move in the opposite direction from the way the Bible says that God is moving. Thus, unknowingly they *jump* (author’s emphasis) into the arms of the devil.”³²

Stassen and Gushee have demonstrated the need to understand the Bible’s teaching on justice. We will begin with the Old Testament and the prophets who spoke on behalf of the poor and the most vulnerable in society.

³¹ Ibid., 346.

³² Ibid.

The Old Testament

Walter Brueggemann, Professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta, stresses the Old Testament's concern for the marginalized in society:

My thesis is this: In the face of the rich pluralism and passionate interestedness of the biblical text in its various local voices, the text every where is concerned with *the costly reality of human hurt* and *the promised alternative of evangelical hope*; that is, the Bible is peculiarly preoccupied with hurt and hope.³³

The author makes the Bible and particularly, the Old Testament especially relevant to a quest for social justice through expository preaching. "The voices of hurt and hope function in the Bible as a sustained act of criticism."³⁴ He goes on to show the target the criticism is aimed at:

The fundamental criticism of biblical faith is against *voicelessness*, against a society in which speech about power and powerlessness is banished and in which social power is so concentrated that it need no longer listen and is no longer capable of hearing. The voice of pathos and possibility sounded in these texts is the Bible's great gift against all the strategies of voicelessness, strategies that were so powerful in the ancient world and in our own situation. While the text comes out of a series of social situations quite remote from our own, the text nonetheless continues to exercise originating authority among us.³⁵

It is as critical today as in Old Testament times to keep the voice of hurt and hope lifted up. When that voice is absent the marginalized are not afforded justice and lose hope that things will ever improve. "*When the voice of hurt is absent, we end in psychic numbing.*"³⁶ He cites the horrors of Vietnam and Nazi death camps as extreme cases of these phenomena. Yet less drastic cases of psychic numbing have caused such things as

³³ Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: Essays on Structure, Theme, and Text* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992.), 90.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 92.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

the abuse or neglect of the marginalized and most vulnerable in our society. “Where such silencing happens, our vision of humanity shrivels and brutality becomes conventional.”³⁷

“*When the voice of hope is silenced, we end in deep despair.*”³⁸ This despair can lead to public indifference towards the poor or even complicity with the dominant powers of our society. Brueggemann concludes that the Bible plays a vital role in seeing that the marginalized are not silenced. “The primary critical function of the Bible is to keep the voice of hope present in the public process. That voice for which the Bible is a principal custodian continues to shatter our perimeters of reality. It does so on behalf of the marginal who refuse to believe the present is ultimate. It does so in the name of God, for whom all things are possible, even the impossible.”³⁹

Brueggemann concludes that the Old Testament calls on us to give voice and hope for those who are hurting. The Bible and the Old Testament make clear our call to speak for the powerless. “We live in the meantime, between the cry of Cain and the promise of John. Until the promise is kept, the public ethical process consists in the pain still present, the cry still voiced until the former things do indeed pass away and the promised newness comes.”⁴⁰

Gustavo Gutierrez, the Peruvian Liberation theologian, centers his theology on his interpretation of the Exodus account and the prophets. He has strongly influenced the church’s quest in Latin America for social justice or the liberation of the people.

Gutierrez interprets the Exodus event as God acting in history to liberate people:⁴¹

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 93.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 94.

⁴¹ J. David Pleins, *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible: A Theological Bible* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2001), 156.

The prophets herald a new act of YHWH in history through which a just order will be established. This new order is not an outgrowth of the old oppressive political order, rather, it represents a definitive 'break with the past'. And herein lies the link between the God of the Exodus and the God of the prophets. In both cases, YHWH is characterized as the one who removes the existing ruling structures in order to establish a more just political and economic system. The Exodus experience offers a profound cultural memory, which gives credence to the prophetic hope that a new social order will be instituted.⁴²

Gutierrez considers the Latin American people the agent of liberation and not YHWH acting alone. He argues that the Hebrews' own actions in the Exodus constitutes "the desacralization of social praxis which from that time on will be the work of man. By working, transforming the world, breaking out of servitude, building a just society, and assuming his destiny in history, man forges himself."⁴³ He envisions the quest of liberation to take place in the political arena including not only confrontation but potential violence as well. The theologian portrays this in the form of a class struggle.

J. David Pleins, an associate professor of religious studies at Santa Clara University, challenges Gutierrez's analysis of the Exodus event:

Where critics find hierarchical, pseudomonarchic, and priestly power structures distasteful, however, they will find the exodus text increasingly problematic for liberation analysis. A socio-historical reading leads us to the view that the book of Exodus is hardly as incompatible with monarchic or hierarchical ambitions as liberation theologians seem to imply.⁴⁴

Pleins argues that the correct interpretation of the Exodus hardly forms the basis for a class struggle or a basis for Liberation Theology:

In its various layers, the text represents the self-assertion of ancient Israel's priestly, monarchic, and tribal hopefuls. It undergirds the quest for national survival that plagued Israel for centuries. Exodus does not in the end encourage internal social revolution of the sort envisioned by liberation writers. The poor as

⁴² Ibid., 166.

⁴³ Ibid., 166-167.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 173-174.

such are not being elevated out of their condition to wrest political control from the ruling elite.⁴⁵

The social structure of the Old Testament society strongly influences its text. In turn, the Old Testament powerfully impacts the message of the New Testament. Jesus said, “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matthew 5:17). Joseph Grassi writes that Jesus and the New Testament authors did not approach the Old Testament as today’s scholars do. They read the earlier testament as Jews of their own era. For them, the “Hebrew Bible, especially the Torah and the Prophets, was the living, perennial word of God. In reading or listening to it, they felt that they were doing so in the same way as the original audience.”⁴⁶

Grassi finds important New Testament social justice roots in the Torah. The Pentateuch or first five books of the Bible show a concern for social justice. He stresses that God made clear his unconditional love of his chosen people. “It was not because you were more numerous than other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of peoples. It was because the Lord loved you and chose you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors” (Deuteronomy 7:7-8). God has chosen to keep the covenant faithfully even though he knows the people are prone to not live up to the covenant. God gives the Promised Land to his people despite their stubbornness and their wilderness misbehavior (Deuteronomy 9:6-7).⁴⁷ God’s love is not intended exclusively for the stranger in Israel. Deuteronomy makes clear that God “executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and... loves strangers, providing them

⁴⁵ Ibid., 174.

⁴⁶ Joseph A. Grassi, *Informing the Future: Social Justice in the New Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), 4.

food and clothing” (10:18). ⁴⁸ Grassi points out that we are called to follow God’s directive. “You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (10:19) ⁴⁹

Grassi maintains that the covenant is perpetual. At the heart of Jewish life he finds the Shemah. “Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words I am commanding you in your heart” (Deuteronomy 6:4-6). The Shemah was prayed twice morning and night by faithful Jews. Jesus pointed to the Shemah along with love of neighbor as the core of the Torah. This is found in all the synoptic gospels. ⁵⁰ Nothing was more important to a devout Jewish person than imitating God’s love for the marginalized. “(God) executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You also shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Deut. 10: 18-19.) ⁵¹

Deuteronomy provided for the forgiveness of debts every seven years (Deuteronomy 15:1-2). This did more than just forgive debts. It allowed people to no longer be treated as slaves because of their debt. This enabled debtors to return to their homes and families. Deuteronomy also provided for loans without interest (Deuteronomy 23: 19). ⁵²

Jesus’ ministry was heavily influenced by the prophet Isaiah. When Jesus launched his earthly ministry in the synagogue at Nazareth he opened the scroll of Isaiah.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 11-15.

⁵¹ Ibid., 15.

⁵² Ibid., 17-19.

Luke 4: 18-19 records Jesus' words. "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." When Jesus had finished reading from Isaiah he told the congregation that the Scripture had just been fulfilled in front of them (Luke 4:19). We will look closer at this Old Testament prophet and how he influenced Jesus' ministry. Preaching during the 8th century B.C., Isaiah warned of judgment and called the people to repentance. The people had lost their sense of justice and were not looking out for the most vulnerable in society. God speaking through the prophet Isaiah called upon the people to cleanse themselves and cease "...to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1: 16b-17). The prophet condemned corruption. The faithful city that had become a whore he challenged to redeem itself by practicing justice (Isaiah 1:21-27).

Isaiah wrote that God promised a Davidic king who would personify justice during his reign. "He will establish and uphold it with justice and righteousness from this time onward and forevermore" (Isaiah 9:7b). The people had hoped that one day they would have the promised ideal king and that hope was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Second Isaiah, chapters 40 to 55, gave hope to the oppressed exiles in Babylon. God's word spoken by the prophet gave hope to the broken hearted children of the covenant. God promised his word would be fulfilled. "So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it"(Isaiah 55:11). God does not want ritualistic fasting but compassion and justice (Isaiah 58:1-14). How we relate to our neighbor tells

a lot about our relationship with God. The theme of justice Isaiah 58:6-9b seems to echo in Jesus' teaching in Matthew 25:

Is not this fast that I chose to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house, when you see the naked to cover them, and not to hide your self from you own kin?"
Isaiah 58:6-7.

The passage goes on to promise that if they do turn to compassion and justice God will answer their cry for help saying, "Here I am" (Isaiah 58:9).

Amos and the Prophet's Call to Speak for the Poor

Abraham J. Heschel of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York pointed out that the philosopher might think the prophets were concerned with insignificant matters. "Instead of dealing with the timeless issues of being and becoming, of matter and form ... he is thrown into orations about widows and orphans, about the corruption of judges and affairs of the mind, the prophets take us to the slums."⁵³

The prophets and their strident message might seem to be irrelevant localized Palestinian history. But to Heschel the prophets are as current and relevant as this morning's newspaper:

Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring ruin to the poor of the land, saying, 'When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain on the Sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat'.
Amos 8:4-6.⁵⁴

Amos was not impressed with the flush times in the Northern Kingdom during the reign of King Jeroboam II (eighth century BC). He spoke boldly against the economic

⁵³ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets, Volume I* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962), 3.

oppression of the poor. “The prophet points out quite clearly that Israel’s success story included in its cast of characters a host of peoples victimized by the rise to the top of a few urban dwellers.”⁵⁵ For example, people who could not pay their debts became debt slaves. Amos bristled at the abuse of this harsh practice. In the eighth chapter, the prophet is referring to the poor being sold into debt servitude for the price of mere sandals. The rich ignored the Torah and exploited the poor. “Amos is incensed that they sold debtors into slavery even for minor debts”.⁵⁶ The rich would take coats and garments from the poor to secure a loan as a pawnshop does today. The Torah’s clear directive to provide for the poor and return clothing to the destitute was callously ignored. “They lay themselves down beside the altar on garments taken in pledge”(Amos 2:8a).”⁵⁷

The market practices criticized in Amos 8 reflect the actual abuses that fleeced the poor. Amos found the norm to be the tampering of scales and even the use of grain sweepings to sell as wheat. The prophet was especially critical of business customs that took severe advantage of the rural inhabitants. “ By these business practices and economic structures the members of the upper classes were guilty of taking property that rightfully belonged to others, whether land, grain or clothing.”⁵⁸

The prophet Amos strongly objected to ostentatious religious ritual that ignored the Torah’s concern for the exploited poor. Speaking on God’s behalf, Amos confronted the wealthy and told them God would not look with favor on their elaborate offerings and

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵J. David Pleins, *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2001.), 369.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 370.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 370.

⁵⁸Ibid. 373.

music if they continued to ignore the plight of the poor. Instead of pretentious worship, Amos called for justice (Amos 5:21-24).

Heschel helps us to understand the dilemma faced by the prophets in general and Amos in particular. A prophet loves his people but calls upon them to reconcile their actions with God's expectations of them. Condemning your own society went against the prophet's instincts and love for his own people. But the prophet was called to reconcile God and his own people. Heschel concludes that the reason such reconciliation is necessary can be found in humankind's rebellion against God. "Perhaps it is due to man's false sense of sovereignty, to his abuse of freedom, to his aggressive, sprawling pride, resenting God's involvement in history."⁵⁹

Amos was such a prophet who loved his people and yet closely related to God's disappointment and understandable anger towards his wayward people:

The prophet regards himself as one who walks together with God. God and he have agreed. It is in light of such sympathy, of such inner identification with the divine disappointment and aversion, that the spirit of Amos can be understood. Amos' compassion for his people is profound. When beholding a vision of how 'the Lord God was calling for a judgment by fire...it devoured the land,' he prayed for mercy (7:4ff). And yet he also identified himself with God's threat of doom for the whole people. This is the burden of a prophet: compassion for man and sympathy for God.⁶⁰

Amos' famous passage, Amos 5:24, has and will help to empower us to work for justice. "Let justice roll down like waters, And righteousness like a mighty stream."

Heschel notes the passage's power is because God is the source of those words:

Justice people seem to agree, is a principle, a norm, an ideal of the highest importance. We all insist that it ought to be—but it may not be. In the eyes of the prophets, justice is more than an idea or a norm: justice is charged with the

⁵⁹ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets, Volume II* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962.), xvii.

⁶⁰ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets, Volume I*, 38.

omnipotence of God. What ought to be, shall be! Righteousness is a vast and mighty stream because God is its unfailing source.⁶¹

Justice According to the Prophet Micah

Micah prophesied judgment upon Judah and Israel in the 8th century BC. While concerned with the worship of false Gods, Micah spoke out against economic injustice and social ills that trouble God. “Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in their power. They covet fields, and they seize them; houses they take away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance” (Micah 2:1-2).⁶²

In this short but powerful book Micah speaks for the powerless and against those who took advantage of their vulnerability. J. David Pleins highlights Micah’s pointed portrayal of the plight of the powerless:

No more harsh a picture of the severity of the exploitation in ancient Israel and Judah has ever been rendered into words than this statement of the prophet:

You have devoured My people’s flesh;
 You have flayed the skin off them,
 And after tearing the skins off them,
 And their flesh off their bones,
 And breaking their bones into bits,
 You have cut it up as into a pot,
 Like meat in a caldron,
 Someday they shall cry out to the Lord,
 But he will not answer them;
 At that time he will hide his face from them,
 In accordance with the wrongs they have done.
 Micah 3:3-4. ”⁶³

⁶¹ Ibid., 213.

⁶² Pleins, opt. cit. , 381. See also Joseph A. Grassi, *Informing the Future: Social Justice in the New Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), 46.

⁶³ Ibid., 382.

Micah does more than preach doom and gloom. His defense of such pointed preaching is that it is for the good of the people. Heschel points out that Micah implies a call to repentance in Micah 2:7. In addition, he gives vision of a future where sins will be forgiven in Micah 7:1-8 and of a day when people can enjoy life without want or fear in Micah 4:4.⁶⁴

Micah teaches us that even in anger God has compassion for us. Citing Micah 7:8-9, Heschel finds Micah teaching us that the ability to accept God's anger "comes from the awareness that we have sinned against Him and from the certainty that anger does not mean God's abandonment of man forever. His anger passes, his faithfulness goes on forever."⁶⁵

Perhaps best known of Micah's writings are verses 6-8 of chapter six. After teaching the nature of authentic worship does not consist of ostentatious offerings, Micah tells his people what it means to walk humbly with God in verse eight:

He has told you, O mortal what is good;
And what does the Lord require of you,
But to do justice, and to love kindness,
And to walk humbly with your God?

There are many prophets who have spoken about social justice in the Old Testament. Those cited will be referred to later in sermons and later sections of this project.

Justice in the New Testament

We will turn now to the New Testament to see what our Lord Jesus Christ has to say about social justice. Jesus' ministry, as recorded in the Gospels, will be examined.

⁶⁴ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, Volume, 101.

Interpreting the New Testament in a social justice context, especially with an idea towards politics and economics offers both opportunities and dangers. It is all too easy to interpret Jesus' teachings to fit our own agenda. Clearly Jesus and the New Testament writings have a deep concern for justice. Grassi maintains that the "New Testament will be 'new' in the sense of a radical return to the core of justice in the Torah as preached by the prophets."⁶⁶ Grassi's work has a strong focus on land reform and the jubilee year with its remission of debts. George Eldon Ladd offers a warning in interpreting the New Testament. He notes:

When Jesus proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom of God, he did so against the background of Hebrew-Jewish thought, which viewed people living in a situation dominated by sin, evil, and death from which they needed to be rescued. His proclamation of the Kingdom includes hope, reaching back to the Old Testament prophets, that anticipates a new age in which all the evils of the present age will be purged by the act of God from human and earthly existence.⁶⁷

Ladd underscores the need to focus our interpretation on Jesus' essential mission. "At the very heart of our Lord's mission is the need of rescuing people from bondage to the satanic kingdom and bringing them into the sphere of God's Kingdom. Anything less involves an essential reinterpretation of some of the basic facts of the Gospel."⁶⁸

It is possible to so overly focus on when the kingdom comes that we become spectators instead of helping to bring in the kingdom. Stassen and Gushee warn about centering our attention on when the kingdom comes. "If we focus on when the kingdom

⁶⁵ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets, Volume*, 101.

⁶⁶ Joseph A. Grassi, *Informing the Future*, 102.

⁶⁷ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of The New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974, 1993.), 45-46.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

comes and not on what its characteristics are (underlining in the original) we neglect the practices that prepare for it.”⁶⁹

Justice in the Gospel of Matthew

Richard B. Hays analyses the Gospel of Matthew as equipping us for the kingdom. He finds that Matthew stresses that Jesus is an authoritative teacher by positioning the Sermon on the Mount at the beginning of his gospel. At the end of the sermon, Matthew 7:28-29, the crowd is amazed because Jesus taught as “one having authority and not as their scribes”.⁷⁰ Matthew teaches that the way to recognize Jesus’ authority is to live out his teaching.

Hays underscores Matthew’s emphasis on Jesus fulfilling the Torah. Jesus said he came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. This is found in Matthew 5:19 near the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew explains this in the rest of the sermon. Part of Matthew’s focus is on Jesus fulfilling the Torah to show that Jesus personifies the prophecies of the Old Testament. “Matthew sees it as his business to demonstrate the continuity of Jesus—both in his teaching and his person—with the Torah; thus, he argues for a harmonious correspondence between law and gospel.”⁷¹

For Hays a key objective of The Sermon on The Mount is for the community to model the kingdom that Jesus preached about. “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew

⁶⁹ Glen H. Stassen and Donald P. Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 20.

⁷⁰ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation; Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), 95.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 96.

5:16).⁷² The teachings of the Sermon on the Mount depict the characteristics of the obedient community. Selfish pursuits and behavior are to be abandoned. Instead of being self-absorbed, “they are to love their enemies, keep their promises..., forgive freely as they have been forgiven by God, give alms in secret, and trust God to provide for their material needs.”⁷³

Members of the community were able to obey because they were open to Jesus’ teaching about just living. The community was transformed “so that their actions will as it were, ‘naturally be wise and righteous’. They will learn the skills and discernment requisite to living faithfully.”⁷⁴ This might seem utopian to some. Donald Guthrie has pointed out that the New Testament is neither a road map for social action nor a political manifesto. “Instead of a pattern for society based on a political programme, the NT concerns itself with a redeemed community whose characteristics appear idealistic to those outside the realm of Christian faith.”⁷⁵

While being in continuity with the Torah, Jesus’ teachings focus on mercy and love. Our Lord references Hosea 6:6, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice” in two dealings with the Pharisees. This is found in Matthew 9:13 and Matthew 12:27:

Jesus’ teaching provides a dramatic new hermeneutical filter that necessitates a rereading of everything in the law in light of the dominant imperative of mercy. In contrast to the scribes and Pharisees, who are said to “tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others” (23:4), the wisdom taught by Jesus yields a different type of Torah: “Come to me, all you that are weary and have heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (11:28-30).⁷⁶

⁷² Ibid., 97

⁷³ Ibid., 98

⁷⁴ Ibid., 99

⁷⁵ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Leicester, England; Apollos: Downers Grove, Illinois, 1990.), 947.

⁷⁶ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996.), 100.

Additional evidence of this hermeneutical filter is found in Jesus' reply to the lawyer's question. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40). This love ethic changes the way the people of the kingdom community interpret the Law:

This has wide-ranging consequences for the specific content of Matthew's moral vision. Those who are trained for the kingdom of heaven are trained to evaluate all norms, even the norms of the Law itself, in terms of the criteria of love and mercy. In the community that lives this vision, then, acts of love and mercy should abound.⁷⁷

Jesus said as he ended the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 7:24 that "Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock." Just as James 1:22 calls us to be doers of the word and tells us in James 2: 17 that without works faith is dead, so too does Jesus call us to act. Citing the end of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7, Stassen and Gushee conclude that "Jesus claims in various ways that the appropriate response to his teachings is simply to practice them. *Discipleship—and therefore, the Christian faith—is about doing the words of Jesus.*"⁷⁸

Justice in the Gospel of Mark

Mark's Gospel focuses not only on our Lord but on his disciples as well. Ladd considers Mark's major emphasis to be Christological. Yet he sees as "...a vital subplot

⁷⁷ Ibid., 101.

⁷⁸ Glenn H. Stassen & David P Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics :Following Jesus in Contemporary Context* (Downer's Grove:InterVarsity Press,2003.), 485.

the analysis of what it means to follow Jesus.”⁷⁹ Ladd maintains that while Mark does not contain the Sermon on the Mount and not as many parables as the other synoptic Gospels, his Gospel has the greatest stress on the teachings of Jesus. Mark’s shorter and dynamic Gospel is balanced between story and Jesus’ teaching. This Gospel gives us a “basis for a realistic assessment of what it means to be Jesus’ disciple. It is a theology in which rejection and triumph, humiliation and glory, meet in the new scale of values in the Kingdom of God.”⁸⁰

Hays notes that Mark’s Gospel avoids direct ethical instruction. The turning point of the Gospel happens after Peter’s confession in Mark 8:30 “that you are the Christ.” Peter is rebuked by Jesus for objecting to our Lord’s passion prediction. In Mark 8:34 Jesus said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Mark leaves it to the reader to process this dialogue. Peter’s confession is vital to Mark’s concept of ethics. Jesus’ disciples get their own identity from that of the crucified Christ. “When we embrace Mark’s answer to the question, “Who do you say that I am?” we are not just making a theological affirmation about Jesus’ identity; we are choosing our own identity as well.”⁸¹

Even after Jesus’ three passion predictions in Mark, the disciples do not grasp the significance of Jesus’ passion and their own understanding of servant leadership. This is followed by James and John seeking special positions in the kingdom. They claim to understand but they do not. The two claimed to be able to drink the cup that Jesus drinks and to be baptized with his baptism (Mark 10:39). Jesus goes on to tell them not to be

⁷⁹ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 233.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), 79.

like the gentiles who lord it over people. They are called to be servants. “For the Son man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”(Mark 10:45). Jesus tried to get the disciples to understand what servanthood meant not only by his teachings but by his life and death. Kingdom people are not supposed to be driven by a quest for power. If we are going to follow Jesus we are called “to share his vocation of suffering servanthood, renouncing the world’s lust for power.”⁸² Mark stresses that following Jesus should not be done with an eye on future rewards. “The way of the cross is simply the way of obedience to the will of God, and discipleship requires following that way regardless of consequences.”⁸³

Mark’s Gospel expects Jesus’ imminent return and this has a three-fold effect according to Hays. First, there is no room for compromise on the ‘radical demands’ of following Jesus. Secondly, nearness of the kingdom changes the way the Torah is interpreted. This can be seen in Jesus not feeling bound by the conventional understanding of the Torah’s food rules and Sabbath restrictions. Thirdly, in the meantime as Jesus’ return is awaited his followers are to replicate our lord’s pattern of suffering servanthood.⁸⁴

Mark’s Gospel shows how the kingdom turns the world upside down including the authority of the Jewish religious leaders. This can be seen in the confrontation with the religious leaders in the temple in chapter 11. The coming of the kingdom makes time urgent and those on the outside of power seem more receptive to the kingdom than those

⁸² Ibid., 82.

⁸³ Ibid., 85.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 87-88.

on the inside. This appears throughout Mark's Gospel right up to near the very end when the centurion speaks. "Truly this man was the Son of God" (Mark 15:39b).⁸⁵

The Gospel of Mark helps those interested in social justice to approach our preaching and quest for justice with some introspection. We need to learn from Mark's Gospel to avoid the temptation to seek power and to become arrogant or self-righteous. This Gospel "*redefines the nature of power and value of power and the values of suffering.*"⁸⁶ This ethic changes everything and though it seems counterintuitive, it can help us keep focused in our search for social justice. Hays finds a lack of closure in Mark because of such factors as the less frequent incidents of post resurrection appearances. "If God's self-disclosure takes the form of riddle and enigma, there can be no place for smugness or dogmatism in ethical matters. Those who think they have the rules firmly in hand are those who suffer from hardness of heart" (3:1-6, 7:1-23).⁸⁷

Jesus' expected return will be hastened by his community bearing witness to the Gospel. "And the Gospel must first be preached to all nations"(Mark 13:10). Jesus' followers, those who take up their cross and follow him will face adversity. "But the one who endures to the end will be saved" (Mark 13:13b). Grassi links the community's suffering with the spread of the Gospel. This suffering will help effectuate the kingdom coming and Jesus' return. "The effective witness of the suffering of believers will be the means of bringing the Gospel to the world, and the end will come. The end of time will be made possible by their voluntary suffering, like that of Jesus."⁸⁸ William L. Lane writes in *The Gospel according to Mark*, the whole gospel has "no passage more

⁸⁵ Ibid., 89-90.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 90.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 90.

⁸⁸ Joseph A. Grassi, *Informing the Future*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), 105.

problematic” than Jesus’ discourse in chapter thirteen.⁸⁹ Persecution does not mean the end is at hand, or it is a time to despair. Instead Lane explains, “It is rather an occasion for witness to the nations, for this must take place before the end comes. What is required for vindication is patient endurance” (verse 13).⁹⁰

Grassi sees a strong emphasis in Mark’s Gospel based on what Jesus said and what he did not need to say. He maintains that Mark “sketches Jesus’ teaching in the form of general principles ...along with an appeal to personally follow and imitate the Master.”⁹¹ Our lord realized his audience knew the laws’ teachings on helping the poor and he did not have to cite these passages in his teaching. Jesus was critical of those who used devices such as the Corban exemption for financial offerings to God. This was used as a legalistic device to avoid honoring ones parents, as God commanded in the fourth commandment, by supporting them in their need.⁹²

In addition to preaching repentance, Mark lifts up Jesus’ ministry of healing and the intention to return people to wholeness as well as reentry to their community. After Simon’s mother-in-law was healed (in Mark 1:31), she returned to community by interacting with Jesus and others present by serving them. Leviticus 21:16-21 excluded the disabled and disfigured from coming near the altar lest they profane it. In contrast, Jesus welcomed people previously shunned because of illness or bodily imperfections and healed them.⁹³ “Social Justice involves compassion and care for others as equals.

⁸⁹ William L. Lane, *The Gospel according to Mark* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1974), 444. See also Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 239.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 445.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 110.

Yet, those who were sick were often regarded as seriously deficient human beings, lacking in conformity to the divine image.”⁹⁴

Based mostly on Leviticus, laws of ritual purity excluded from community women at certain times, as well as Gentiles and those who were considered unclean by their occupations. Jesus was sensitive to those who were excluded from society for uncleanness. His ministry modeled inclusion and restoration to community rather than exclusion. For example (Mark 1:40-44), Jesus not only touches and heals a leper but begins the man’s process of restoration to society by directing him to go to the temple to show the priest that he was healed.⁹⁵ Jesus also showed his inclusive ministry by his table fellowship with sinners and tax collectors. This was not permissiveness but out of a desire to restore them through repentance despite the Pharisees’ criticism (Mark 2:15-17). In fact, Jesus called Matthew the tax collector, a despised outsider, as one of his twelve disciples (Mark 2:13-14).⁹⁶

Jesus told the questioning man (Mark 10) that he lacked one thing and to sell his possessions and give them to the poor and follow him. Jesus goes on to warn that wealth can become an obstacle to salvation rather than a blessing. Clearly Jesus taught that wealth and material blessings are to be shared.⁹⁷

Justice in the Gospel of Luke

Sharon H. Ringe calls concern for the poor and the just use of wealth a major concern of Luke’s Gospel. This Gospel is embraced by liberation theologians as

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 112.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 113.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 118.

evidence of Jesus' special concern for the poor and oppressed. Unlike Matthew, Luke's account does not spiritualize the poor (6:20). Luke contains stories in which he juxtaposes wealthy and powerful against the poor, disabled and powerless:

Wealth that is simply amassed as a hedge against the future or a source of security is condemned (6:24-26; 12:13-21; 16:1-13; 19-31). 'Almsgiving' as the redistribution of wealth and not a charitable dole is presented as an important expression of one's discipleship or following of Jesus.⁹⁸

Ringe describes Luke portrayal of Jesus' concern for the poor as not being against wealth per se. Luke focuses instead on some hoarding wealth while others go without the basic necessities of life. It is the lack of equitable distribution of wealth that troubles Luke. "The strength of the themes of wealth, poverty and possessions in Luke is striking, because it is not what one would expect, given the time and place where Luke wrote."⁹⁹ The church was a small movement on the margins of society without earthly power. It would not be until the era of Constantine that the church would itself become a powerful institution.¹⁰⁰

Luke's Gospel as interpreted by Ringe provides strong biblical support for the quest for preaching social justice and examining unjust social and economic structures in our contemporary society. The Gospel of Luke criticized societal structures that put the poor under the domination of the privileged classes. Luke called for a more just society in which the poor could have self-determination and a choice as how to live their own lives. Ringe contends that Luke's Gospel calls us today to a self-awareness that we are part of an unjust system and God is challenging us to do something to help bring about a more just society. We are part of a system "that rewards people who are wealthy,

⁹⁸ Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 9.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

powerful or able-bodied, and that penalizes those who are not. Through this Gospel, the Good News of God's reign confronts us from outside the norms of business as usual and requires our response.”¹⁰¹

Jesus, in Luke's Gospel, has a special place in his heart for the poor, the outcasts such as Samaritans and Gentiles as well as others who were marginalized. George Eldon Ladd sees Luke giving more emphasis to Jesus' mission to the poor than do Mark or Matthew. By putting Jesus' reading of Isaiah near the beginning of his Gospel along with making it dramatic, Luke “makes clear that he sees the liberating mission and the ‘good news to the poor’ of Isaiah 61 as at the heart of Jesus' purpose.”¹⁰²

The great reversal appeared earlier in the Magnificat in chapter one of Luke. The marginalized appear in the birth narrative and beatitudes, in the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus blesses the poor and the hungry first (Luke 6:20-12). The sermon also contains woes to the rich. “These concentrated sections of teachings on wealth and possessions in Luke 12:13-34; 14:7-33; 16:1-31 add up to a scathing denunciation of callous materialism and a call to reckless generosity arising out of a fundamental detachment from concern for worldly property.”¹⁰³ Luke is clearly concerned here with actual poverty when he refers to the poor. “The inequalities of the current society will have no place in the new age. It therefore behooves those who belong to both to show compassionate concern for the poor and to avoid the danger of an affluence that recognizes no need for salvation.”¹⁰⁴ Jesus' expected imminent return makes living out Luke's gospel critically important.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1993.), 243.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 243.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 245.

Hays highlights Luke's proclamation of God's concern for the materially poor:

Luke proclaims...God's liberating power on behalf of the poor and hungry (Luke 1:52-53, 4:18-19) and highlights the vision for a new community of believers who share all possessions in common so that there are no poor among them, in fulfillment of the Deuteronomic command. This new community is portrayed as manifesting the power of the message of the resurrection (Acts 2:42-47, 4:32-35). Accordingly, the concrete economic cost of discipleship receives consistent emphasis in Luke's story: Jesus proclaims bluntly, 'None of you can become my disciple if you do not sell all your possessions' (Luke 14: 33). The person who stores up provisions for himself is a fool (Luke 12:16-21), whereas Jesus' followers are exhorted to sell their possessions and give alms (Luke 12:33). Zacchaeus exemplifies authentic response to the coming of the kingdom of God by declaring that he will give half of his goods to the poor (Luke 19:1-10).¹⁰⁶

Hays argues that this beneficent act of repentance, "the equal sharing of half of his possessions with the poor was an effort to fulfill prophetic justice, which was not satisfied with generous gifts but moved toward equality."¹⁰⁷

The biblical call for justice found in both testaments is not just about personal sin. Ron Sider calls our attention to the corporate as well as the individual components of injustice and their interplay. "Neglect of the biblical teaching on structural injustice or institutional evil is one of the most deadly omissions of the church today."¹⁰⁸ Jesus, despite living under imperial Roman rule "spoke out against economic oppression."¹⁰⁹ The apostle Paul in Romans and Ephesians gave admonitions to resist evil structures or worldly ways. Paul felt the demonic polluted our social structures.¹¹⁰ Sider's writings help focus this project on the need to discern what God wants each us to do about injustice including its corporate aspects. We cannot do everything but what we do we should do joyfully and not driven by guilt. "It is an invitation to joy and meaning in life,

¹⁰⁶ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: Harpers, 1996), 405.

¹⁰⁷ Joseph A. Grassi, *Informing the Future* (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), 175.

¹⁰⁸ Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christian in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity* (Dallas: World Publishing, 1977.), 110.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 116.

an occasion for blessing our neighbors, and a wondrous opportunity to be a co-worker with the Lord of history.”¹¹¹

Both the New Testament and the Old Testament give us a solid biblical basis to teach, preach and practice social justice. The concept of biblical justice is more than one of many interesting ideas. Seeking justice is a central point of the Bible. It is not optional but an imperative from God. Jesus powerfully taught us that in separating the sheep from the goats, his yardstick will be how we treated “the least of these” (Matthew 25). James reminds us, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans, and widows, in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:26-27). We are called to be advocates for justice in both word and deed. Expository biblical preaching can help educate, motivate and empower our churches to become a community grounded in God’s just word. Together we can prayerfully and humbly seek to discern how God would have us strive for justice in our own unique contemporary context.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 117.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 120.

CHAPTER THREE

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Preaching Social Justice

Social justice is a central theme in both the testaments. The biblical section of this paper documented that the prophets and Jesus made concern for those at the bottom of society a central emphasis of their proclamation. When we fail to preach social justice, we deprive the laity of hearing one of the big ideas of the whole Bible. If the church fails to speak for the powerless we are not faithful to God's word. Clyde Fant, a Baptist teacher of preaching, says that preaching risks becoming irrelevant if it fails to address social justice. "Unless preaching speaks in the cause of the oppressed, the poor, and the marginalized of every society it will become a seldom visited cultural ghetto in less than a century."¹¹² James M. Childs, Jr. writes: "Preaching justice is at the core of the church's gospel proclamation."¹¹³ Markus Barth called for preaching in the manner of the prophets and apostles in order to be most beneficial to the church. "Such preaching occurs when a man or woman is totally exposed, if not shattered by two voices: the cry of despair and want resounding from today's situation, and the voice of God that cannot be muted."¹¹⁴

Despite the importance of preaching social justice, many parishioners have either not heard sermons on social justice or have not heard them frequently. Jim Wallis found

¹¹² Clyde E. Fant, *Preaching for Today* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1987), 56.

¹¹³ James M. Childs, Jr., *Preaching Social Justice* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2000), 1.

¹¹⁴ An address at the graduation service of the Baptist Theological Seminary at Zurich, Switzerland, on December 18, 1974 by Markus Barth, entitled *Biblical Preaching Today*.

that great many of his seminary classmates had never heard a sermon on social justice.¹¹⁵ Michael C. Jaskilka surveyed lay members at a Conservative Baptist annual meeting in 1997. He found that 22% of the lay members had never heard a sermon on social issues and 14% reported only hearing a sermon on social issues once a year.¹¹⁶ Of those who heard sermons on social issues, by far the social issue or subject most had heard preached (46%) was abortion followed by same sex marriage (28%).¹¹⁷ He also found that 19% of parishioners surveyed hoped a sermon on a social issue would help them to “defend what I already believe” while far fewer wanted to be stretched, informed, educated and least of all to be challenged to change.¹¹⁸

Preaching social justice can often encounter resistance. Father Walter J. Burghardt, S.J. writes in *Preaching the Just Word*, that he repeatedly experiences a “closing of Catholic ears, even indignation and anger at the suggestion that hard earned money should be rerouted to wastrels on relief.” Church members have to rub shoulders with poor and they cynically think that they and not the preacher know what these folks are really made of.¹¹⁹

Catholic ears, of course, are not the only ones that are closed at times to social justice sermons. Because of a misapprehension of Martin Luther’s writings, Lutherans came to think of what is called the “two kingdoms” doctrine. This misinterpretation can be seen in the nineteenth century writings of Ernst Luthardt. “To begin with the Gospel has absolutely nothing to do with outward existence but only eternal life.” Luthardt’s

¹¹⁵ Jim Wallis, *God’s Politics* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), xxii-xxiv.

¹¹⁶ Michael Karl Jaskilka, *How to Preach on Controversial Social Issues*, Doctor of Ministry Thesis at Gordon-Conwell Theology Seminary, May 1, 1998, 58.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 58, 61.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 63.

¹¹⁹ Walter J. Burghardt, S.J., *Preaching the Just Word* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), ix.

dualistic emphasis seems like the antithesis of preaching on social justice. “Christ’s servants, the preachers, likewise have no reason to espouse these secular matters but only to preach grace and the forgiveness of sins in the name of Christ.”¹²⁰ Carl E. Braaten points out in *Lutheran Theology* that there is not a political “sphere” and a separate spiritual one. Instead he sees God’s involvement as two handed. “On the one hand, he works creatively to promote what is good for human life in all its personal and social dimensions and on the other hand, he works redemptively to bring the world forward to the final perfection summed up in Christ.”¹²¹

Consistent with God’s concern for both the spiritual and material welfare of all people, main-line denominations such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the United Methodist Church, and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) have issued social statements on economic justice. The Roman Catholic Bishops’ Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy and the various publications by Evangelicals for Social Action have articulated the biblical call for social justice. These documents and publications have all called for economic justice and attacking the root causes of poverty, but do not necessarily reflect what the people in those denominations think. Stephen Hart attempts in his self-defined descriptive study, *What Does the Lord Require?: How American Christians Think About Economic Justice*, to determine how people in the pew “actually think” in contrast to ascertaining how “they ought to think.”¹²² This sociologist and religious researcher analyzed a 1982 study by a predecessor body of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (E.L.C.A.). In Hart’s opinion, the

¹²⁰ Quoted in James M. Childs, Jr. , *Preaching Social Justice* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2000.), 5.

¹²¹ Carl E. Braaten, *Lutheran Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983.), 134.

¹²² Stephen Hart, *What Does The Lord Require?: How American Christians Think About Economic Justice* (New York: Oxford Press, 1992), 8.

survey indicates that Lutherans think that faith applies to all areas of life and that ministry by both lay and clergy can take part in all settings.¹²³ He examined a 1988 survey by the E.L.C.A. where participants were asked if Christian principles applied to “almost every social and political issue.” In addition, they were asked if they agreed that frequently it was not practical to apply such principles to political and social issues. Eighty per cent of the Lutherans surveyed rejected “dualistic answers”. “In theory, then, most seem open to connecting faith to the economic issues, and reject compartmentalization based on other worldliness.”¹²⁴

In the 1988 study, when people were asked more specific questions or for concrete answers to questions about changing public policy or “how society is organized,” a shift occurred. About half gave dualistic answers. Reviewing both the 1982 and 1988 studies Hart concluded that despite claiming that faith extended to all aspects of life, the more specific the question the more the answers sounded dualistic. He concluded that there exists a “deep rooted compartmentalization” and that this is an obstacle to applying faith to social action.¹²⁵ There are Christians who favor total integration of faith to every aspect of life and those who want to completely compartmentalize faith. For many in the middle, the specific issue determines whether or not faith should be applied. Many find it difficult to apply faith to “economic and structural change”. Complicated analysis is needed “about the root causes of inequality, and a religious community of any size is likely to reach a consensus, at best, only on broad principles to govern economic life.”¹²⁶

¹²³ Ibid., 78.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 79.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 79-80.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 80.

Hart examined studies conducted by the National Opinion Resource Center at the University of Chicago conducted from 1984 to 1989, and earlier studies. He found the sole determining factor consistently influencing economic attitudes was denominational affiliation. “Catholics and those with no religious preference are consistently but not dramatically more liberal on economic issues, and Protestants belonging to predominantly African-American denominations are much more liberal than White Protestants---particularly those in mainline denominations.”¹²⁷

Based on a 1999 survey by the E.L.C.A., Stephen Hart determined that there is no relationship between the pastor’s views on social issues and those of the congregation. Churches are not usually ideologically driven. “[T]here is no guarantee that if people are persuaded to accept a given position they will use it to support a particular set of political views.”¹²⁸ Hart advises against taking a definite political position from the pulpit because it will “upset people who have a different reading of faith, or who believe in separating faith from politics.”¹²⁹ It would be better to “provide an environment that encourages members to make their own connections between faith and politics.”¹³⁰ He suggests that congregations can take strong positions on meta-issues with less conflict than substantive issues. While some risk of conflict still exists, he counsels stressing that Christian faith applies to “material and public as well as private concerns” rather than advocating a particular economic policy or action.¹³¹

Graham Gordon argues that “Jesus does not hold evangelism and social action in tension, but has an integral approach, treating people as human beings and responding to

¹²⁷ Ibid., 156.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 207.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 207-208.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 208.

every need (Luke 8:40-56; John 6).” Also in Luke 4:18-19 Jesus equates the Good News with a call to social justice.¹³² Gordon, a public policy officer for Tearfund, an evangelical Christian relief and development agency, maintains that Jesus was political in the sense that he “challenged the corruption, hypocrisy and injustice in Jewish society.”¹³³ The two kingdoms doctrine does not, in his estimation, mean we can avoid social action. We cannot love our neighbor, Mt. 6:20, if we avoid the world. To be the light of the world, we must be connected with it (Matthew 5:13-16).

In his book, *What If We Got Involved?: Taking A Stand Against Social Injustice*, Gordon offers advice that reflects his experiences in international Christian development in the third world. Rather than being overwhelmed by complex social issues, he suggests selecting an action that is attainable or “doable.” Choose an issue, study it, and network with others to tackle the problem. He presents a biblical rationale for working against injustice and six major reasons for tackling injustice. In a nutshell, if we care for the poor, we get involved, and we take a stand by tackling injustice. In order to more than superficially aid the poor “we need to tackle the root causes of poverty by confronting injustice and oppression. If we get involved in confronting poverty, we are inevitably led to tackle injustice, both in individual cases and systems and structures.”¹³⁴

Perspectives on Poverty and the Working Poor

There seems to be a dichotomy in the way many perceive the working poor. Some see the poor as victims of circumstances. They rhapsodize about well-intentioned,

¹³¹ Ibid., 210.

¹³² Graham Gordon, *What If We Got Involved?: Taking A Stand Against Social Injustice* (Carlisle, Cumbria, U.K., 2003), 4-5.

¹³³ Ibid., 5.

hard-working, and heroic figures caught up in an oppressive economic system. Others see the poor as shiftless and their own worst enemy because of self-defeating behavior. Walter Williams, a nationally syndicated columnist and economics professor, offers a simple formula for avoiding poverty. He says it is not rocket science. “First, graduate from high school. Second, get married before you have children, and stay married. Third, work at any kind of job, even one that starts out paying minimum wage. Finally, avoid criminal behavior.”¹³⁵ Williams, a politically conservative African-American, argues that a minimum wage job will lift someone out of poverty. He further maintains that the reason why many more black children live in poverty compared to white is not race. Instead, he attributes the disparity to welfare and the fact that more white children live in two parent homes. Citing the 1999 census he notes that in black homes having a married couple present over 50% were middle class with incomes exceeding \$50,000.¹³⁶

A completely different analysis is offered by others such as Obery Hendricks, a professor of biblical interpretation at New York Seminary. He chides his fellow black Christians who support political conservatives. “Political conservatives seek to preserve the privilege and power of those who already have wealth and power.”¹³⁷ He claims that the historical record will support his conclusion. “That is not what prophetic Christianity stands for. Political conservatism is the exact opposite of prophetic Christianity.”¹³⁸

¹³⁴ Ibid., 37.

¹³⁵ Walter Williams, “Avoid poverty by following this simple formula: 4 easy guidelines to dramatically increase your chances of success”, *Charlotte Observer*, May 12, 2005, sec. A, 9.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Obrey Hendricks, “The Prophetic Imperative: Reclaiming the Gospel by Speaking the Truth to Power,” in *Blow the Trumpet in Zion! : Global Vision and Action for the 21st Century Black Church*, edited by Iva E. Carruthers, Fredrick Haynes III, and Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005), 82.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

Hendricks urges preachers, guided by the Bible, to stand up to the prevailing culture and not be intimidated by post-Constantinian Christianity.¹³⁹

How Some Secular Social Critics See the Poor

Writing in the 1960s, Michael Harrington's *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* had a major impact on the way we look at poverty. He went beyond government statistics and claimed that many more millions of Americans were close to being poor. He warned that these people were just one setback, such as an illness or layoff, away being pushed back into poverty. Harrington predicted that without massive government intervention, economic conditions could create a permanent underclass.¹⁴⁰ The poor in his view had become invisible especially to affluent suburbanites. Economic and societal progress in the thirties left the poor behind. Therefore, poverty should be thought of as structural or societal not personal.¹⁴¹ In his analysis, the structure of poverty has "been constructed so as to destroy aspiration; it is a system designed to be impervious to hope."¹⁴² He bristles at the stereotype of the poor lacking a work ethic. They have instead the misfortune to be born into the wrong socio-economic class. After being born into poverty "they could have been paragons of will and morality, but most of them would never have had a chance to get out of the other America."¹⁴³

Harrington considers hopelessness the most noticeable characteristic of the other Americans.¹⁴⁴ Throughout his work he questions whether we have the will to eliminate

¹³⁹ Ibid., 84-85.

¹⁴⁰ Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in America* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, Inc., 1962), 4.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 4-10.

¹⁴² Ibid., 11.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 16.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 170.

poverty. The political party system he says is tilted against the poor denying them a real voice. He feels our government has the resources to eliminate poverty. “How long shall we look the other way while our fellow human beings suffer?”¹⁴⁵

Over forty years ago Harrington mused that the poor did not need another social scientist. Instead the poor need an “American Dickens to record the smell, texture, and quality of their lives.”¹⁴⁶ Almost forty years later Barbara Ehrenreich attempts to offer a vivid, if not Dickens-like, word picture of what the life of the working poor is like. Her controversial book, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, takes us with her into the lives and work place of the working poor as she cleans motel rooms, works split shifts as a waitress, toils as a nursing home aid, and struggles with the demands of working for Wal-Mart on the sales floor. She knew it would not be easy to get by working at marginal wage jobs. The author found statistics before starting her low wage jobs in 1998 that showed a person would have to make \$8.89 an hour to be able to live in a one bedroom apartment. In addition, the chances of an average welfare recipient grabbing a “living wage” job is about 97 to one.¹⁴⁷ Equipped with a Ph.D. in biology, an ability to speak well, and in good health, she set out from her study to try to experience the life of someone going from welfare to trying to make it on a low-wage job. She wanted to learn if she could pay her bills and get by as the working poor struggle to do on a daily basis.¹⁴⁸

Her description of the everyday work at Wal-Mart shows the wearisome and

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 184.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 18.

¹⁴⁷ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2001), 3.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 6.

demeaning existence of the working poor. The workday starts with a Wal-Mart pep cheer. After working several hours standing, it takes all of Ehrenreich's organizational skills to cope with such degrading things as hardly having a long enough break to get a drink of water, use the rest room and get off her feet for a few minutes. The work shifts can change without adequate notice making it all but impossible to work at a second job. You cannot make it on \$7 an hour. She laments she could not stay long enough to help organize a union at Wal-Mart. But she couldn't afford to stay.¹⁴⁹ "Something is wrong, very wrong, when a single person in good health ...can barely support herself by the sweat of her brow. You don't need a degree in economics to see that wages are too low and rents too high."¹⁵⁰ Because of increased social stratification, those in the affluent suburbs have no clue as to how the working poor live. The political climate she feels is such that there exists a "conspiracy of silence" about the plight of the poor.¹⁵¹

The social critic is pointed in her comments about corporate America and full of empathy for the working poor. She contends that while employers providing workers a living wage might be challenging, it still would not be enough. She doubts that it would be possible "for the private sector to provide everyone with an adequate standard of living through wages, or even wages and benefits, alone: too much of what we need...is too expensive even for middle-class families."¹⁵² She calls upon the U.S. government to provide a panoply of free or subsidized services such as health insurance, housing, and child-care to make up for a lack of a true living wage. In her analysis, "most civilized

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 163-190.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 199

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 217.

¹⁵² Ibid., 214

nations” make such social benefits available.¹⁵³ The “working poor, in the social critic’s estimation, are ironically the real philanthropists of our society:

They neglect their own children so that the children of others will be cared for; they live in substandard housing so that other homes will be shiny and perfect; they endure privation so that inflation will be low and stock prices high. To be a member of the working poor is to be an anonymous donor, a nameless benefactor, to everyone else.¹⁵⁴

Pulitzer prize winning author, David K. Shipler provides in *The Working Poor: Invisible in America*, a scholarly and nuanced assessment of the plight of the working poor. He offers a sophisticated and humane analysis that does not make heroes of the poor, or ignore the employers’ challenge of trying to make a profit in an increasingly competitive global economy. While admitting he is rooting for the working poor, he endeavored to look at them with “clear eyes” and not with the eyes of an ideologue. “Indeed devout conservatives and impassioned liberals will be bothered by this portrait of poverty...for the reality I discovered does not fit into anyone’s political agenda.”¹⁵⁵ He tracks the abuses in the garment industry especially the exploitation of illegal workers. Yet many Americans work in these jobs at these low wages (\$6 to \$8 an hour). Some dishonest employers actually steal the illegal workers wages by disappearing if immigration officials shut down their sweatshop. Compassionate garment industry employers try to do the right thing for their employees despite having little room for profit and a lot of risk in their business. Shipler calls the garment industry a case study showcasing how hard it is to bring economic justice to this industry pinched by

¹⁵³ Ibid., 214.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 221.

¹⁵⁵ David K. Shipler, *The Working Poor: Invisible in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), X.

competition from scandalously low wages globally. “The hard rules of the marketplace will yield only to stricter government regulation and a measure of conscience.”¹⁵⁶

Shipler does not rant against the evils of capitalism but maintains a scholarly detachment in balancing its flaws and weighing its beneficial effects. “It has a ruthlessness about it, a cold competitive spirit that promotes the survival of the fittest and the suffering of the weak. But it also opens opportunity unparalleled by communism, socialism or any other variant so far attempted.”¹⁵⁷ The system results in disparity but the freedom offered is the key to the free enterprise system including the freedom to keep wages low. Risk takers are rewarded in our decentralized economy. There is a political tension in our government-regulated system. Workers need to be safe and protected from abuse. Conversely, such regulations “have not been allowed to suffocate private businesses, which need space to maneuver, invent, and grow.”¹⁵⁸

In the way of remedies Shipler recommends consideration of different economic tools such as regional minimum wage laws linked to the cost of living in a part of the country, living wage legislation, and refinements and expansion of Earned Income Tax Credit. This will help corporations as well as workers.¹⁵⁹ He has confidence that our societal institutions can remediate or self-correct “when grievous wrongs are done or endemic suffering exposed, when injustice is discovered or opportunity denied.”¹⁶⁰

There are no easy answers to lifting the working poor out of poverty. “If either the system’s exploitation or the victim’s irresponsibility were to blame, one or the other

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 84.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 88.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 88-89.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 291.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 298.

side of the debate would be satisfied.”¹⁶¹ It is not as simple as the greed of corporate America or the lack of caring by government. Neither is it just about personal failings of the working poor. He calls for conservatives and liberals to move beyond the current political and ideologically driven debate about the working poor and poverty. Both society, including government and business, as well the individual worker must assume responsibility.¹⁶² The working poor teetering on the brink of poverty “are essential to America’s prosperity, but their well-being is not treated as an integral part of the whole. Instead, the forgotten wage a daily struggle to keep themselves from falling over the cliff. It is time to be ashamed.”¹⁶³

The Social Justice Witness of the Church and Its Scholars

In examining social-justice literature, studying poverty and its root causes it may be helpful to focus on the economy and our capitalistic system. In 1891, Pope Leo XIII issued a famous papal encyclical critical of the exploitation of the working poor. What some feel was most important was not the content of the document and its reasoning, but the fact that the pope spoke out against unjust treatment of the poor and workers.¹⁶⁴ The pope challenged the status quo and capitalism itself. This is most significant because the church stood with the poor and took a stand for social justice. Pope Leo XIII said a hundred and fifteen years ago that a worker should be paid a wage sufficient to support

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 299.

¹⁶² Ibid., 299-300.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 300.

¹⁶⁴ Father Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Vatican Social Teaching* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1983), 11.

himself.¹⁶⁵ Pope Leo hoped to bring about economic reform by converting those at the top.¹⁶⁶

Questioning the prevailing capitalistic economic model can be risky business for the church and its clergy. Archbishop Dom Helder Camara, who serves the very poor in Brazil lamented, “When I feed the poor, they call me a saint, when I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist.”¹⁶⁷ According to religion professor Gerhard Vanderhaar, we have not thoroughly examined the bad effects of our economic system. “We in the West live under the macro-economic imperative of the capitalist system of production and consumption.”¹⁶⁸ We overlook the fact that capitalism was “built on the backs of the oppressed” and that it requires a level of unemployment and consequently some poverty. The profit motive can cause greed and if unbridled by regulation capitalism can cause great disparities as some become very wealthy while others fall into extreme poverty. “The economic imperative is taken for granted. It is responsible for good people doing bad things.”¹⁶⁹

The call for social responsibility and social justice, he maintains, has been weakened by the emphasis on individual salvation and personal morality. When good people compartmentalize unpleasant realities and fail to take their life experiences and faith into their work, these good people can become part of doing bad things.¹⁷⁰ He offers no formula for making us more compassionate but calls us to move beyond such compassion blockers as nationalism, materialism, individualism, and self-centeredness.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 13.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Quoted in Gerhard Vanderhaar, *Why Good People Do Bad Things* (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1994), 48.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 40.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 75-93.

Instead we need to think of ourselves as “part of all humankind.”¹⁷¹ He urges us to help those around us as we strive to become people of good faith. “Sometimes the opportunity will be thrust upon us, as it was to the Good Samaritan on the road to Jericho.”¹⁷² But he does not want us to just stop with acts of compassion. He calls for structural reform through a “Jericho Road Improvement Association.”

James M. Childs, Jr., Lutheran theologian and ethicist, feels that it is our Christian vocation to try to make a difference in combating unrestrained economic greed. In his work, *Greed: Economics and Ethics in Conflict*, Childs argues that greed instead of being just an individual characteristic “may in fact be a by product of an economic culture.”¹⁷³

He dismisses as “cowboy economics” the notion that a society can experience unlimited economic growth. Theologically he challenges the theory of unlimited growth as a denial of our own limits. As a theologian he sees humanity’s failure to accept our limits as leading to sinfulness. “Sin is rooted in our alienation from God. It is alienation expressed in our denial of our finitude that elevates the independent self above its relationship to God. This is the meaning of the fall story.”¹⁷⁴

This belief in unlimited economic growth has become part of our corporate economic life. It fosters individualism over thinking of the common good. Childs views the parable of the rich man and Lazarus as being about reversal and not judgment (Luke 16:19-31). The parable teaches us that the extreme poverty that exists beside extreme wealth will see a reversal when the kingdom fully arrives. “We who have been privileged by grace in faith to see the truth of this promise revealed in Christ are, as his

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 107-111.

¹⁷² Ibid., 113.

¹⁷³ James M. Childs, Jr., *Greed: Economics and Ethics in Conflict* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 3.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 11.

people, his continuing presence on earth, called to anticipate this promise in our own striving for economic justice.”¹⁷⁵

Childs identifies *stakeholder capitalism* as a not only moral but a practical way that business can weigh the interests of those having a stake in the functioning of the corporation. Shareholders should not necessarily have the last word. On a case-by-case basis the ethics of a particular course of action should be determined by balancing the moral concerns raised by all stakeholders. Internal stakeholders might include employees. Activists would be considered external stakeholders.¹⁷⁶ This concept of stakeholder capitalism could result in management thinking of more than the bottom line. The question becomes who has a moral claim on the assets of a company. This seems almost utopian but it is an idea worth considering. He argues that stakeholder capitalism could help nudge corporations to do more than the moral minimum.¹⁷⁷

We are reminded by Childs that no matter how personally generous we are, we remain part of a larger economic system. “I cannot abdicate involvement in the ethical issues of economic life by simply saying that this is the way of life in a sinful world.”¹⁷⁸ Combating greed means helping to shape economic policy and this is “a genuine part of our call to witness to the Gospel.”¹⁷⁹ Our Christian vocation is to anticipate, to “proclaim the hope of the Gospel in its broadest proportions.”¹⁸⁰ We are also called to resist “rampant individualism” and promote community.¹⁸¹ More than anything else “what is preached” will set the agenda for the church’s mission and ministry. He argues that if

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 28.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 98.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 127.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 130.

concern for social justice is “a regular part of the church’s preaching, they will more likely be a regular part of the church’s mission.”¹⁸²

Many evangelicals have been a strong voice for social justice and have roiled the complacent church attendees and the public. Jim Wallis points out in *God’s Politics* how lamentable it is that “the faith of Jesus has come to be known as pro-rich, pro-war, and only pro-American.”¹⁸³ He hates to see the interface of religion and politics ignore the biblical vision of social justice.¹⁸⁴ Tony Campolo, an internationally known evangelist and professor, writes that we lack generosity as a nation. “Jesus taught us that the nations of the world will be judged by how they respond to the needs of the poor.” What especially distresses him is that the folks who are always dropping Jesus’ name “are the ones who seem the most willing to abandon his teachings and choose a politics of pragmatism. They are the ones who claim that the ideals outlined in the Sermon on the Mount just will not work in the real world.”¹⁸⁵

An interesting development is the impact of Catholic social justice teaching on evangelicals. David Brooks, New York Times columnist, has encountered evangelicals “who are more and more influenced by Catholic social teaching, with its emphasis on good works. I see the historical rift between those who emphasized personal and social morality.”¹⁸⁶ The time has come for the left and the right to stop calling one another “godless hedonists and primitive theocrats” and instead help the poor together. Cultural differences will continue. “But liberals and evangelicals are realizing that you don’t have

¹⁸² Ibid., 131

¹⁸³ Jim Wallis, *God’s Politics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 3.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 4.

¹⁸⁵ Tony Campolo, “What If? Jesus’ words conflict with our deeds,” *Winston-Salem Journal*, October 1, 2005, Sec. B, 7.

¹⁸⁶ David Brooks, “Drop culture war to escalate war on poverty: Evangelical Christians and liberals can create a natural alliance,” *Charlotte Observer*, May 29, 2005, Sec. P, 3.

to convert people; sometimes you can just work with them.”¹⁸⁷ He sees more and more people such as Bono and Rick Warren who are teaming up and opting out of “the logic of the culture war so they can accomplish more in the poverty war.”¹⁸⁸

Brooks’ estimation of the influence of Catholic social teaching on evangelicals seems to overlook the preexistent biblically-driven commitment of evangelicals to the quest for social justice. Groups such as World Vision and Evangelicals for Social Action have long been working with the poor, walking with the poor, and advocating for the poor. An important contribution of the Evangelicals for Social Action has been the publication of works such as *Toward A Just and Caring Society: Christian Responses to Poverty in America*.¹⁸⁹ Stephen Mott and Ron Sider note in a lead article, “Economic Justice: A Biblical Paradigm”, that there is an important role for government in bringing about economic justice. They write that faithful and informed biblical understanding would dictate an economic model that allows those capable of working “access to appropriate productive resources so that they can be creative co-workers with God, create wealth to bless their families and neighbors, and be dignified members of their communities.”¹⁹⁰

Mott and Sider say one reason that the government needs to play a role in economic justice is sin. When greedy and powerful folks block “rightful access to productive resources, the state rightly steps in with intervening power to correct the

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ *Toward a Just and Caring Society: Christian Responses to Poverty in America*, edited by David P. Gushee (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999).

¹⁹⁰ Stephen Mott and Ronald J. Sider, “Economic Justice: A Biblical Paradigm,” in *Toward A Just and Caring Society: Christian Responses to Poverty in America*, edited by David P. Gushee (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 42.

injustice.”¹⁹¹ At times when societal institutions and individuals can not provide for those in need, the state must help meet that need. But the authors maintain that the state also “has a positive responsibility to foster justice.”¹⁹² Their analysis of scripture leads them to that conclusion. “The Lord has made you king to execute justice and righteousness” (I Kings 10:9; cf, Jer.22:15-16). These two words (*justice* and *righteousness*), as we have seen, refer not only to fair legal systems but also to just economic structures.”¹⁹³

Gustavo Gutierrez and Liberation Theology’s Critique of Capitalism

A Peruvian scholar and minister to the poor in Lima, Gustavo Gutierrez has been called the dean of liberation theology. In *The Power of the Poor in History*, he writes that “a rereading of the gospel from a position of solidarity with the poor and the oppressed will enable us to denounce the use made of the gospel by the mighty in order to place it in the service of their own interests.”¹⁹⁴ He claims that the gospel can never be linked to “any concrete social formula.” However, an examination of his writings shows a flirtation with socialism. “We speak of social revolution, not reform; of liberation, not development; of socialism, not modernization of the prevailing system.”¹⁹⁵ The author’s context, living among the very poor in the developing world exploited by colonialism and dominated by international cartels, has no doubt created a lens through which he sees capitalism. The advance of capitalism with the accompanying extreme poverty offers proof to Gutierrez “once again that capitalist development is of its very nature

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 43.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983), 69.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 45.

detrimental to the masses, as the naked exploitation now endured by the poor nations of the world all too abundantly attests.”¹⁹⁶

Assuming for the sake of argument that much of what Gutierrez has written is correct, he tends to stress the sinfulness of capitalist economic structures and not focus on humanity’s own sinfulness. He argues that sin can only be addressed in its historical context. Again he seems to emphasize that sin “is present in structures of oppression, created for the benefit of a few.”¹⁹⁷ All economic systems stand under God’s judgment and many utopian experiments throughout history have fizzled because of human sloth or turned into repressive systems. Gutierrez does not discuss this in his critique of the prevailing capitalist economic system.

Liberation theology has “two acts.” Action comes first followed by the theology. This is a simplification. First is “involvement in the historical liberation praxis, and the simple proclamation of the word of God to that praxis.”¹⁹⁸ He envisions the poor as empowered by the love, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Reflecting Christ’s love “to the point of giving one’s life for one’s sisters and brothers, affirming one’s hope in the life of the resurrected Christ who vanquishes all death and injustice, is the central element of the power of the poor in history.”¹⁹⁹

Gutierrez sees Bartolome de Las Casas as a pioneer of liberation theology in that he fought the actions of the conquista and their classically trained theological apologists. Las Casas stood with the outcast and oppressed Indians. He taught that “Christ speaks to

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 85.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 62.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 103.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 149.

us from among the Indians.”²⁰⁰ Gutierrez says that the best way to debunk a theology is to look at it in practice. ²⁰¹ He is critical of progressive theology and theology of development as failing to get to the root of the problem by fighting structural injustice. His disdain is also strong towards a theology of revolution which tends to “baptize the revolution” and its lightweight theology.

A theology of liberation is advocated. “The poor appear within this theology as the key to an understanding of liberation and of the meaning of the liberation and the meaning of the revelation of a liberating God.”²⁰² Gutierrez recognizes that more reflection is needed to more fully develop a theology of liberation. He believes in the God of the poor and exploited. “This is why he reveals himself only to the person who does justice to the poor.”²⁰³

Michael Novak and Defense of Democratic Capitalism

This Roman Catholic lay theologian applies theology to economics. Michael Novak views democratic capitalism as a system of political economy that has for its spiritual base Judeo-Christian moral values. He stresses human freedom and the dignity of the individual as key elements of democratic capitalism. Novak presents democratic capitalism as a system that combines a market economy, a democratic system of government, and a pluralistic society that respects the rights of the individual. His book, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*, takes seriously the dynamic of sin in his analysis of capitalism, and offers a three-pronged understanding of sin within capitalism. First, sin is

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 197.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 196.

²⁰² Ibid., 200.

²⁰³ Ibid., 209.

a given which cannot be eliminated and must be weighed in any analysis of a political economy. Novak's second point is that democratic capitalism seeks to channel the energy of sin into positive uses through the concept of unintended consequences.

Redirecting the dynamic of sin does not require unrealistically hoping or lofty idealism from broken individuals. Third, a component of self-interest is moral virtue.²⁰⁴ This neoconservative intellectual considers democratic capitalism a system that allows tares to grow with the wheat. It is designed for sinners and is practical rather than utopian.²⁰⁵ Democratic capitalism finds the worst-case scenario to be the state coercing citizens to be good. He views capitalism as far more realistic than those utopians who consider social structures and systems to be the source of all evil. Changing the social structures and systems will not suddenly eradicate evil and make us all virtuous. "By contrast, realists hold that the source of human evil lies in the self and in the necessary limitations of every form of social organization."²⁰⁶

The doctrine of unintended consequences is at the center of Novak's defense of democratic capitalism. It focuses not on people's motives but on the "final consequences of their actions."²⁰⁷ Instead of ignoring sin and self-interest, democratic capitalism seeks to use these propensities productively and creatively. "While basing itself on something less than perfect virtue, reasoned self-interest, it has attempted to draw from self-interest its most creative potential."²⁰⁸ Novak sees our cultural and moral system at the core of our successful political and economic system. From his perspective, the weakness of

²⁰⁴ Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1982), 82.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 86.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

democratic capitalism is not political or economic functioning but in the possible erosion of its moral-cultural system.²⁰⁹

Novak makes clear that God judges every system and finds it deficient. It is wrong to say that scripture mandates a particular system. Liberation theologians “err in binding scripture to socialism.”²¹⁰ He uses various Christian doctrines which have helped to mold the beneficial effects of democratic capitalism. Particularly helpful was his application of the incarnation. It helps us to see the world realistically and not as we would like it to be. We need to come to terms with our world’s brokenness and to “disbelieve that the world is now or ever will be turned into the city of God.”²¹¹ He calls for hope muted by realism.²¹² The temptation is to think that Jesus winning our salvation transforms humans into paragons of virtue here on earth. “A political economy based on love and justice is to be found beyond, never to be wholly incarnated within human history.”²¹³ Therefore, we have to have realistic expectations and work with a political economy within that broken world as we “nourish all that is best in it.”²¹⁴

Novak says that the doctrine of original sin makes clear that “the root of all evil does not lie in our system but in our heart.”²¹⁵ While that is true, Novak does not give much emphasis to the evil within democratic capitalism and its consequences. His doctrine of the separation of realms discounts the importance of applying our faith to the market-place. He argues that “no intelligent human order ...can be run according to the

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 185-186.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 335.

²¹¹ Ibid., 341.

²¹² Ibid., 342.

²¹³ Ibid., 343-344.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 350.

counsels of Christianity.”²¹⁶ Novak argues that we should take sin seriously and look at political and economic dynamics realistically. If we follow that advice slavishly, we do not take our faith to work with us. There is a place for the interface of our faith and the political economy. Novak does not fully develop that dynamic nor does he seem to be concerned with the lack of distributive justice. The separation of realms he advocates could lead to quietism, as did the Lutheran experience with the two kingdoms doctrine. Democratic capitalism may be the best system available as Novak contends, but biblically driven advocacy by Christians can help root out some of the injustices within it. He makes clear that no system measures up to the kingdom and that democratic capitalism welcomes judgment under the kingdom’s criteria. “For it is a system designed to be constantly reformed and transformed, and it alone of all systems has within it the resources for transformation through peaceful means.”²¹⁷

Christian Economic Justice and Political Theory

Ashley Woodiwiss, a Wheaton College professor, asks if it is possible to formulate a Christian theory of economic theory. Her article, “Christian Economic Justice and the Impasse in Political Theory,” compares, contrasts and critiques such political theories as liberalism (including its neutrality thesis) and communitarianism. She concludes that there is an impasse and neither of these political theories can be an adequate basis for a Christian theory of economic justice.²¹⁸ Her argument is that classical liberalism and its neutrality thesis took “discussion of virtue, religion, and

²¹⁶ Ibid., 352.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 359.

community off the table [and] the Neo-Aristotelian thesis put it back on.”²¹⁹ Even in the Neo-Aristotelian approach to liberalism and its literature, the voice of religion is muted. It has within it an “exclusionary dimension.”²²⁰ Communitarians believe that “the public good is identifiable, achievable, and ultimately realizable.”²²¹ She finds that communitarianism neglects structural flaws in our current system and it has a “studied silence” on the plight of the poor. This theory would “distract Christian theoretical concerns away from the matters which ought to be central to Christian economic justice.”²²²

After concluding that neither theory, liberalism nor communitarianism, offer the theoretical foundation for a theory of economic justice she asks an important question. How can² Christians develop a theory of economic justice? She arrives at a “reconfigured” ecclesiocentric approach. She emphasizes the futility of formulating a comprehensive theory. “There can not be a Christian *theory* of justice. There can only be local, particular, ecclesial efforts to be the church and in so doing to love, serve, respect, and embrace the poor God has place in our midst, and we in theirs.”²²³

Christian Perspectives on the Politics of Justice

J.Philip Wogaman, a United Methodist pastor and professor of ethics, writes in *Christian Perspectives on Politics* that justice should be at the center of civil discourse. While skeptical of a public philosophy, he argues that theology and the faith community

²¹⁸ Ashley Woodiwiss, “Christian Economic Justice and the Impasse in Political Theory,” in *Toward A Just and Caring Society: Christian Responses to Poverty in America*, edited by David P. Gushee (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 112-136.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 124.

²²⁰ Ibid., 125.

²²¹ Ibid., 128.

²²² Ibid., 114.

have much to contribute to the public dialogue on justice. He maintains that “when justice is truly the subject matter, and when the deepest...insights of great theological traditions are plumbed to explore the meaning of justice, then even these terms take on a deeper pertinence.”²²⁴ Christians need to be part of the public discourse. There should be a Christian presumption for democracy. “Governmental systems that are less than democratic should be required to face a continuing burden of proof to show that it is not yet possible to be democratic.”²²⁵ Wogaman dismisses theocracy because it “has already decided who God can and can not speak through.”²²⁶ He emphatically states that the “transcendent God can speak through *anybody*.”²²⁷ When the state controls religion the state becomes God. This is not just a historical footnote to him. This eventuality must be guarded against because the church will always have some component of its existence under the governance of the state. “The integrity of the church must always be a matter for theological struggle.”²²⁸

Wogaman calls for the church to be energetically involved in the various aspects of the political process. First, the church should be engaged in “influencing the ethos.” He cites as examples of the church “influencing the spirit of the times out of which action springs” such as the Barmen Declaration in Nazi Germany, ending segregation in the United States, and ending Apartheid in South Africa.²²⁹ While specific political actions can be taken he clearly asserts that the church has a duty “...to address the ethos, the

²²³ Ibid., 143.

²²⁴ J. Philip Wogaman, *Christian Perspectives on Politics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 217.

²²⁵ Ibid., 122.

²²⁶ 254.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid., 256.

²²⁹ Ibid., 264-265.

cultural values, [and] the spirit of the times.”²³⁰ Second, the church should inform the laity about issues. He gives high marks to the pastoral letters on the economy and nuclear weapons produced by the U.S. Catholic Bishops as well as Protestant documents on race relations and other issues. The church must take great pains to be well informed before issuing position papers especially on controversial issues. The church also has to take the risk that it may be wrong. He reminds us that the church is a flawed human institution inhabited and led by humans with limitations. “It is God’s ‘earthen vessel.’ If the church had to limit itself to actions and proclamations concerning which it could be certain, what could it do or say?”²³¹

The third aspect of church involvement is church lobbying. The church needs to avoid becoming corrupted by power. The church cannot claim purity because it does not take part in lobbying. Churches that do not lobby still have to compromise in other areas such as how they invest, own property, and treat their own employees. Churches, when they have a solid theological basis and knowledge of the issues, are a voice that can help shape public policy for the common good.²³² The fourth level is supporting a candidate for public office. He creates a presumption against supporting a particular candidate because it is so hard for the church to determine what is in a person’s heart. But there is no theological barrier to supporting a candidate “if circumstances warrant it.”²³³ Level five, becoming a political party is also problematic. Votes should not drive the church

²³⁰ Ibid., 265.

²³¹ Ibid., 266.

²³² Ibid., 267-268.

²³³ Ibid., 268.

because the right decision may not be popular to a majority for decades to come.

Churches need to be free to care for and guide people of all political parties.²³⁴

Level six is civil disobedience which again Wogaman counsels against. Civil disobedience should be limited to extraordinary circumstances such as when “the law or policy is unusually or egregiously contrary to Christian conscience, or to frustrate the effect of the law or policy when the human consequences are perceived to be intolerable.”²³⁵ The last involvement to be considered is taking part in revolution. This should be avoided because it frequently involves violence. The church risks becoming co-opted by joining in a revolution. “Revolutionary causes tend to absolutize themselves, and the church must always be in a position to remind people that there is not absolute except God.”²³⁶

An overarching theme of Wogaman’s work is the church’s role in fostering civil discourse. He calls for us to show respect for others based on “humility before God.”²³⁷ The church does not have all the answers. “We should respect those who disagree, partly because we love them and partly because they may be right and we may be wrong.”²³⁸

The Lutheran Study on Economic Life

In 1996 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America published a study entitled *Give Us This Day: Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*. It acknowledges the dynamics of the market system. “However, if we allow it to become a system of unchallenged absolutes, we fall into idolatry. Our identity in Jesus Christ grounds and

²³⁴ Ibid., 268-269.

²³⁵ Ibid., 270.

²³⁶ Ibid., 271.

²³⁷ Ibid., 272.

shapes us according to a vision different from that of a market economy.”²³⁹ Using that criterion, both the market economy and its consequences should be evaluated. When they are consistent with God’s intentions for humankind they are to be affirmed and challenged when they do not measure up.²⁴⁰ The statement laments the relentless grip of poverty. “The pervasive witness of scripture is that a society is judged by how it treats those in its midst who are poor. **No one should have to live without the means for meeting their livelihood; each person has a right to life’s basic necessities** (bold print in the original).”²⁴¹ Poverty in our affluent society is impermissible. Ameliorating this scandalous condition is “stymied in part because of the divergent ways in which poverty and solutions to it are perceived as moral issues in our society.”²⁴²

This Lutheran statement envisions an important role for the church is seeking economic justice. It is in the church that we most completely grasp our true calling as Christians. “Our lives are grounded in God’s grace rather than what we make or fail to make of ourselves through economic activity. This proclamation of the Good News, frees us to live out our vocation in the world”.²⁴³ The Church has the important mission of empowering people to live out their baptismal vocation by ministering to others in daily life. “Equipping people for that ministry is one of the Church’s most important responsibilities in relation to economic life.”²⁴⁴

Economic Justice for All: The Catholic Bishops Letter

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ *Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread: Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America 39, 1996), 39.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 73.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Ibid., 115.

The publication of *Economic Justice for All: A Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy* has engendered a plethora of publications in response to the document. The Catholic Church has a rich history of speaking on behalf of the poor, and many of the Catholic immigrants at the turn of the last century benefited from Catholic social teaching. Bishop James Malone wonders if Catholics who no longer are the beneficiaries of such teaching will embrace it. “At the core of his question is whether or not we continue that common moral vision enunciated throughout our history.”²⁴⁵

The Bishops write as descendants of the prophet Micah and followers of Jesus who delivered the Sermon on the Mount.²⁴⁶ In their introduction they make clear the basis for their letter is scriptural and the social teaching of the church. Six moral themes are highlighted in their introductory overview. Each economic decision must be evaluated on the basis of whether or not it fosters human dignity. Human dignity can only be brought about and guarded in community. Everyone has a right to be a participant in the community’s economic life. Everyone has a duty to care for the poor and marginalized. Human rights are “the minimum conditions” to live within community. Finally, all societal institutions have a duty to foster human dignity and assure human rights.²⁴⁷

The bishops start with the premise that we live in a mixed economy and they call for full employment.²⁴⁸ The pastoral letter has over three hundred and sixty headings followed by discussion. Because of this only the major themes will be discussed in this

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Thomas Narin, O.F.M., “The Church’s Common Moral Vision and the Vision of the Economic Pastoral”, in *Economic Justice: CTU’s Commentary on the Bishop’s Pastoral Letter*, edited by John Pawlikowski and Donald Senoir (Washington, D.C.: The Pastoral Press, 1986), 55.

²⁴⁶ “A Pastoral Message: Economic Justice for All” #4 reprinted in *Economic Justice*, Ibid. xii.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., xiv-xvi.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

project. Father Thomas Nairn has written that the “bishops’ pastoral is a call to the U.S. Catholic community to carry on this social tradition of our church and to embody it in our lives by working for justice and by active love of neighbor (#60).”²⁴⁹

Paul J. Wadell, C.P. sees the “common good” as the main theme of the letter. The bishops write that only faithful adherence to the common good can create a just economy (#331). Wadell defines the common good, based on Catholic social teaching as “justice working to achieve the highest and most proper human good; it was justice working to achieve the optimum development of humanity, and for Christians ... the union of all people with God.”²⁵⁰ He writes that the great disparities in wealth (# 183) which signify economic injustice are not because the common good is unworkable. The common good is forgotten “because it is a threat to the idolatry of wealth, an idolatry that ravages not only the poor, who are denied the goods they deserve, but also the rich who unknowingly become as false as their loves.”²⁵¹ He concludes by concurring with the bishops that there can be no common good or cleansing of society’s economic structures until we have a conversion of our hearts (#328). Wadell is saying there can be no common good until “we are willing to become good ourselves” and “no just social order” until we ourselves become just.²⁵²

The Catholic bishops have performed a valuable service by applying biblical principles and their own rich tradition of social teaching to the plight of the poor. They

²⁴⁹ Thomas Nairn, O.F.M., “The Church’s Common Moral Vision and the Vision of the Economic Pastoral” in *Economic Justice: CTU’s Commentary on the Bishop’s Pastoral Letter*, edited by John Pawlikowski and Donald Senior (Washington, D.C.: The Pastoral Press, 1986), 53.

²⁵⁰ Paul Wadell, “The Common Good: Why there can be no justice without it” in *Economic Justice: CTU’s Commentary on the Bishop’s Pastoral Letter*, edited by John Pawlikowski and Donald Senior (Washington, D.C. : The Pastoral Press, 1986).

²⁵¹ Ibid., 60.

²⁵² Ibid., 63.

have lifted up the need for social justice and challenged not only Catholics but all of us to strive to put our faith into action on the behalf of the most economically vulnerable.

Preaching Social Justice: Is it a quixotic task?

Preaching about specifics can get you into trouble. Noted psychiatrist Karl Menninger reminds us that they warned Micah not to preach on specifics (Micah 2:6). “They have been reproaching and rebuking and intimidating clergymen for being specific every since.”²⁵³ He feels as a psychiatrist that the clergy must have people confess or confront their sins before receiving assurance of God’s forgiveness.²⁵⁴ The preacher has to take the role of pointing out sin seriously. “If he, or we ourselves, ‘say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us: (John 1:8). We need him to direct us, to accuse us, to reproach us, to exhort us, to intercede for us, to shrive us. Failure to do this is his sin.”²⁵⁵

Just because preaching social justice, especially being specific, can make our audience uncomfortable or even agitated is no excuse to avoid it. “The clergyman ... must point out the truth, temporarily painful though it may be to his listeners. As in analysis, the preacher’s words may hurt, but they hurt for a purpose, for enlightenment, for a freeing of bound energies.”²⁵⁶

When preachers think of all the social and economic injustices in our society today, we can become overwhelmed. Just because we cannot help to heal all the world’s brokenness is not an excuse to accept the way things are. Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall’s writing can be applied to our task of preaching social justice:

The spirit of God fosters hope in our hearts, not to preserve us from foresight and planning and hard work, but on the contrary in order to give us the kind of courage we need to believe that *our* work, which is never very great, is nevertheless enfolded in a more perfect work--- God’s ‘providential’ governance

²⁵³ Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin* (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1973), 193.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 195.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 198.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 203.

of the world---and that our work is therefore contributing to the world's 'mending' (to use a wonderful Jewish expression).²⁵⁷

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had social justice preaching and action thrust upon him by circumstances. He did not seek to become a civil rights leader. Later in his career he focused on economic justice.²⁵⁸ Robert M. Franklin, an ethics professor at Chandler School of Theology, tells us that we too can be called out of our comfort zones like Dr. King:

The spirit of the times can find us, unsettle us, and demand that we drop what we are doing and take up God's cause. Friends and family are likely to judge such shifts as erratic and irresponsible. But those who have changed history understand that they are being responsible to the One who has made deep claims on their existence.²⁵⁹

James M. Childs, Jr., in *Preaching Justice: The Ethical Vocation of Word and Sacrament Ministry*, sees in preaching social justice an opportunity for the preacher to be healed:

Even though we feel like victims of disdain for justice, in the greater depths of our shared condition we are also the perpetrators. Once we realize this we can begin the healing by preaching justice out of the depths of the Gospel, which alone can speak to the depths of our wounded condition.²⁶⁰

Preaching social justice is not a quixotic task. The baton (not the lance) has been passed to us, "let us run with perseverance the race that has been set before us" (Hebrews 12:1).

²⁵⁷ Douglas John Hall, *Why Christian? : For those on the edge of faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 106-107.

²⁵⁸ Robert M. Franklin, "From Prophetic Preaching to Utopian Community" in *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Future of Multicultural America*, edited by James Nichols (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 2004), 34.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁶⁰ James M. Childs, Jr., *Preaching Social Justice: The Ethical Vocation of Word and Sacrament Ministry* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2000), 97.

A Short Word on How to Preach Social Justice

Social justice preaching can be confusing to the listeners. You may not be telling them something that they are eager to hear. For this reason expository biblical preaching helps to make clear that the message is biblically based. Because social justice sermons can be misunderstood it is critical that the audience understand the major biblical themes. The big idea concept, developed by Haddon Robinson, is vitally important. For a thorough discussion of this see Haddon Robinson's *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*.

Delivery of a social justice sermon is also important.²⁶¹ Relying on a manuscript not only inhibits effective communication in any sermon but this researcher feels it could be fatal to social justice sermons. The audience needs to feel the preacher's passion for biblical social justice instead of feeling they are hearing a position paper read to them.

Walter J. Burghardt, S.J., in *Preaching the Just Word*, stresses the importance of the preacher's passion for justice. It is not a matter of quoting the right justice passages but doing it with such passion that the listener knows that you feel the scripture's urgency.²⁶² What our audience appropriately expects "is a soul-piercing word that conveys what a revealing God expects, a justice that mimics God's own fidelity to God's promises, God's special care for the helpless and hopeless, the God who ... hears the cry of the poor."²⁶³

²⁶¹ Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Developing and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001).

²⁶² Walter J. Burghardt, *Preaching the Just Word* (New Haven: Yale Press, 1996), 20.

²⁶³ Ibid., 21.

CHAPTER FOUR

PREACHING SOCIAL JUSTICE: METHODOLOGY

A sermon series will be preached at this researcher's congregation, St. Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church (E.L.C.A.). The methodology will include a pre-sermon series survey to determine each participant's understanding of social justice and attitude towards aspects of social justice that will be contained in the sermon series. Following each sermon, there will be a questionnaire to be completed right after the service. At the completion of the sermon series, a survey will be conducted and participants will also be given an opportunity to share what components of the sermon were helpful in better understanding social justice issues from a biblical perspective. In addition, it will also ask if anything in the series was counter productive. This methodology will be utilized to test this researcher's thesis that effective expository preaching on social justice issues can transform people's attitudes and future actions in a measurable way.

Goals

- I. Parishioners will be able to understand the biblical mandate for social justice.
- II. Parishioners will be able to identify biblical texts that support the biblical mandate for social justice.

It is also the intention that people will take action to help achieve social justice within their own contextual setting.

PRE-SERMON SERIES SURVEY

Thank you for giving your time to help me and others learn more about effectively preaching on social justice issues.

1. Why are most poor people are in that situation? (Indicate all that apply by ranking the following answers in order of importance from one to five with number one being the most important.

_____a) They lack adequate education and job skills.

_____b) They lack motivation and a strong work ethic.

_____c) They are victims of the economic system (structural injustice)

_____d) They come from a dysfunctional family or they have a substance abuse or mental health problem.

_____e) There are usually a combination of factors.
2. Should political and social justice issues such as immigration, poverty, economics/living wage and social inequality be addressed in sermons?

_____Yes

_____No
3. Have you heard sermons in other churches or from previous pastors on political and social justice issues such as immigration, poverty, economics/living wage and social inequality?

_____ Never

_____ Seldom

_____ Frequently

_____ Do not recall

4. If you can, please give examples of biblical texts or stories that address social justice issues.

_____ Cannot think of any right now.

5. If you can, please give examples of local, national, and global issues in which biblical justice teachings apply.

_____ Cannot think of any right now.

6. I am currently taking part in the following activities of mercy, kindness, and compassion: (check all that apply)

_____ a) donating to the local food bank (Loaves and Fishes)

_____ b) volunteering at local agencies such as Crisis Assistance Ministries, Meals on Wheels, and Lutheran Family Services in the Carolinas or other agencies helping the disadvantaged and needy in our community

_____ c) donating to Lutheran Disaster Relief, the Red Cross or other agencies after national or international disasters

7. I am currently taking part in the following activities to help bring about social justice:

_____ a) donating to Lutheran World Hunger

_____b) participating in the Crop Walk

_____c) working for social justice by participating in a group such as Bread for the World or writing elected officials on behalf of the poor and disadvantaged

_____d) working for systematic changes to promote social justice locally through our schools, government and other institutions (For example, by advocating equity in school facilities and teacher quality for inner city schools so that the quality of education will not be determined primarily by our students' zip codes.)

QUESTIONNAIRE AFTER EACH SERMON

- I. What is the main idea of the sermon?

- II. What stories or biblical references were most helpful in understanding this idea?

- III. What examples did the preacher use to make the main idea clear to you?

- IV. Give an example of how this idea could be applied locally or globally.

- V. What action could you take in response to this sermon?

Thank you for giving your time to help me and others learn more about effectively preaching on social justice issues.

POST-SERMON SERIES SURVEY

1. Why are most poor people in that situation? (Indicate all that apply by ranking the following answers in order of importance from number one to number five with number one being the most important.)

_____a) They lack adequate education and job skills.

_____b) They lack motivation and a strong work ethic.

_____c) They are victims of the economic system (structural injustice)

_____d) They come from a dysfunctional family or they have a substance abuse or mental health problem.

_____e) There are usually a combination of factors. Should political and social justice issues such as immigration, poverty, economics/living wage, and social inequality be addressed in sermons?

_____Yes

_____No

2. If you can, please give examples of biblical texts or stories which address social justice issues.

_____c) Cannot recall at the moment.

3. If you can, please give examples of local, national, and global issues in which biblical justice teachings apply.

_____ Can not think of any right now.

4. I am currently taking part in or plan to begin taking part within three months in the following activities of mercy, kindness and compassion: (Check all that apply.)

_____ a) donating to local food banks (Loaves and Fishes)

_____ b) volunteering at local agencies such as Crisis Assistance Ministry Meals on Wheels and Lutheran Family Services in the Carolinas which help the poor and disadvantaged

_____ c) donating to Lutheran Disaster Relief, the Red Cross or other agencies after national or international disasters

5. I am currently taking part or plan to begin taking part in the next three months in the following activities to help bring about social justice:

_____ a) donating to Lutheran World Relief

_____ b) participating in the Crop Walk

_____ c) working for social justice by participating in such groups as Bread for the World or by writing elected officials on behalf of the poor or disadvantaged

_____ d) working for systematic change to promote social justice locally through our schools, government and other institutions (For example, by advocating equity in school facilities and teacher quality for inner

city schools so that the quality of education will not be determined primarily by our students' zip codes.)

6. How has this sermon series affected you personally? Use your own words to discuss if or how this sermon series helped you to apply the Bible to social justice issues. Feel free to comment on anything that you feel was not helpful or was counter- productive. (Use the other side if more space is needed.)

Thank you for giving your time to help me and others learn more about effectively preaching on social justice issues.

CHAPTER FIVE

A SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS AND PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

A series of four sermons were preached on social justice. The surveys found earlier in this document were printed on one sheet of paper using both back and front. This was an attempt to make it less intimidating. Eleven congregants were asked to participate. They were recruited by the church secretary and promised anonymity. This was to allow listeners to be candid in their individual responses. A number was assigned to each participant and this researcher only knows that they represent a cross section of the congregation. Eleven persons took part in this process. The audience hearing each sermon included about seventy-five people each Sunday. This included about twelve people far too young to be potential participants in this project.

Of the eleven who agreed to take part in listening to the sermon series and providing written feedback, nine completed pre-sermon and post-sermon questionnaires. Seven of those nine were present for all four sermons.

Question on Addressing Social Justice Issues in Sermons

An analysis of the pre-sermon responses indicates that only one person answered “no” to the question number two. This indicated he/she felt political and social justice issues such as immigration, poverty, economics/living wage, and social inequality should not be addressed in sermons. (Please note that the respondents did the evaluation of the fourth sermon and the overall post-sermon series evaluation at the same time.) Although eight of nine persons answering the post-sermon survey felt that it was appropriate to

preach on such social justice issues, two people changed their opinion. After the sermon series one respondent now felt that social justice sermons were appropriate. Another respondent now felt that such sermons should not be preached.

Question on Having Heard Social Justice Sermons

Question number three was only asked in the pre-sermon series survey. No one indicated hearing social justice sermons preached on a frequent basis and two indicated they had never heard a sermon on social justice. Five people indicated they had seldom heard social justice sermons and one person did not answer the question.

Question on Ranking Reasons Why Most People Are Poor

In the first question, each respondent was asked to rank in order of importance the five possible causes of people being poor with the number one (1) meaning the most important factor. Four people answered that it was a combination of factors that put people into the situation of being poor. Two did not complete this question. One considered a combination of factors as the least important and ranked the answer fifth. Another ranked a combination of factors as third in importance as a cause of making people poor. Lack of education and job skills was ranked second in importance by five respondents, third by two respondents, and was not answered by one person. Lack of motivation and a strong work ethic was ranked fourth in importance by two respondents and third by another two persons. Four did not rank this as a cause of persons becoming poor. Only one person ranked coming from a dysfunctional family or having a substance abuse or mental health problem as the most important cause of a person's poverty. One

person ranked this possible cause of poverty fourth. Dysfunction also received one-third and one second place ranking in order of importance. Four people did not rank a dysfunctional family of origin or substance abuse as a cause of poverty.

The only significant change in attitude from the pre-sermon series questionnaire to the post-sermon series questionnaire on the ranking of importance in causing people to be poor was structural injustice. In the pre-sermon answers the average score for viewing those in poverty as victims of the economic system (structural injustice) was 4.16. The respondents clearly thought this cause was almost the least in order of importance. The average score after the sermon series was 2.6 which tends to indicate respondents now consider structural injustice a significantly more important cause of making people poor. There were indications, including informal comments by parishioners that were not part of the surveys or data collected, that the first sermon on the need for equity in the public schools had the biggest impact. This shows the need to apply social-justice preaching, especially relating to structural injustice, to situations to which the listeners can relate within their own community.

Question Asking for Biblical Texts on Social Justice Issues

In the pre-sermon surveys three people could not think of an example of a biblical text that addresses social justice issues. On the post-sermon surveys four people could not recall such examples. This could possibly be attributed to something causing the respondents to be hurrying since two of the nine post-sermon surveys completed left several questions unanswered. On the pre-sermon survey one person could cite three examples of texts in the Bible applying to social justice. After the sermons, two persons

could cite five examples. In the pre-sermon survey two people could only cite one biblical example and two persons could only cite two examples. The most examples anyone could list before the sermons were three. In the post-sermon survey all three who answered the question could cite several examples. It is perplexing why some did not answer the question in the post-sermon survey. It may be due to haste, embarrassment at their inability to recall some biblical passages, or a lack of confidence in their ability to write in English (several speak English as a second language).

Question Asking for Examples of Issues in Which Biblical Justice Themes Apply

In the pre-sermon survey only three of nine people could offer any examples of local, national, and global issues in which biblical justice issues apply. Of those three that did respond, one cited as the only examples the need to have prayer in public schools, courtrooms, and at all civic events. This seems to indicate that the respondents did not apply the biblical theme of social justice to issues in the contemporary world. This is important. More research is needed to determine if this lack of connection is typical within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and other main-line denominations. After the sermon series, six people gave multiple examples of issues in which the concept of biblical justice applies. Three did not respond to the question including the person who previously listed prayer in public venues as an issue in which principles of biblical justice applies.

Question Asking About Participating in Activities of Compassion

Those engaged in acts of compassion showed no change from before and after the sermon series. This can be attributed to the fact that the respondents were doing and continued to do all three acts of compassion listed. The respondents' participation in activities of compassion was very high before the sermon series began and remained very high after the series.

Question about taking part in activities to achieve social justice

In both the pre-sermon and post-sermons surveys almost all respondents indicated that they donate to Lutheran World Relief and to the Crop Walk. There was little room for growth in this area because of the high level of charitable participation before the sermon series even began. None indicated in the pre-sermon questionnaire that they were engaged in social justice advocacy even by writing letters to public officials. None said they were working for systematic change on the local level. There was some growth in this area, which becomes clearer in responses to the last question on the post-sermon series survey.

How The Sermon Series Affected Participants Personally

The responses to the last question proved to be the most interesting to this researcher. Each respondent was asked how the sermon series affected him/her and how the sermon series helped him/her to apply the Bible to social justice issues. One person did not answer the question. This person left many of the questions on both of the pre-sermon series and post-sermon series blank too. The respondent made no comments either positive or negative. Looking back at this respondent's reactions to individual

sermons, there were not signs of negativity. I can't determine if the person really did not want to participate or just has difficulty comprehending sermons. The person's lack of responsiveness may reflect intimidation by the whole process. All of the person's written answers were sketchy. A limitation of this study was the small number of usable responses. Since this series was done at a small church, I would suggest an extended interview format to supplement the surveys in future studies of this nature at small churches. In addition, a study over a longer period of time could document exactly what actions people took on behalf of social justice in the months following the sermons.

The other eight respondents provided written answers to the question of how the sermons affected them personally. One respondent promised to work for systematic change to make society more just by drawing a line to a preceding question. The same respondent said, "I am more aware of the overwhelming biblical theme of social justice. The sermons helped me to clarify the active role we must play and gave concrete examples. They motivated me to do more. I feel more humble." This response was most encouraging. The person seemed better equipped and motivated to put a more informed biblical justice understanding into action. There is the possibility that the respondent is giving this researcher the answer that he/she thinks is wanted.

Another respondent was more retrospective. "The sermons caused me to think of things that I have done to help others as well as opportunities I have had to help and did not take them." It seems this person has had his/her consciousness raised or is at least going through some type of self-examination. One person wrote that the sermons caused her/him to "be aware of the need to act (underlined by respondent) both individually and in groups to help even one student and not be overwhelmed by the enormity of need."

This response seems to indicate the person is now more aware of the need for social justice and is motivated to work for justice knowing there will be limitations on how much of a difference it might make. This attitude is far better than “all or nothing thinking” which can result in doing nothing because the issues are so complex and the need is so great. The need to be persistent in preaching on social justice was made clear by another respondent’s comment. “I think these sermons gave me a message we all need to hear again and again. We tend to get so wrapped up in our own lives that we forget those in need.” This helps me to be aware that it may take far more than a four-week preaching series to make a measurable difference in church member’s attitudes and actions relating to social justice. I would suggest that social-justice preaching be a regular part of the preaching schedule during the entire year. People need to regularly hear this theme over a long period of time. This may prove more effective in changing attitudes and actions.

A respondent felt the sermon series encouraged her to continue to transport people to the hospital and doctor’s appointments “as long as I am able to do so.” This suggests the respondent is one of the many elderly people in our congregation. Despite this, she/he seems motivated to move beyond continuing her compassionate ministry of transportation. The person indicated a desire to take part in efforts to make the school system more equitable (structural justice). The last person completing a post-sermon survey indicated a very positive response to the sermon series. “They were helpful in reminding me that there are many ways to assist others and there are many social justice issues on the local, national, and world-wide that need my and our attention. I feel that if our relationship with God is right then we will respond without thinking that this is an

“obligation”. This is encouraging that someone feels motivated more by grace than guilt. There still remains the possibility that the respondent is giving the researcher the “right answer” or the answer the researcher wants.

Responses to Sermon One

The written feedback from the individual sermons gave much more of a sense of energy or effervescence than the post-sermon series survey answers. This can partly be attributed to the individual sermons being fresh in the respondent’s minds. The more conversational responses indicated to this writer that this document format was less threatening than the post-sermon surveys. In analyzing the responses, it was surprising that all of the respondents were able to identify the main idea and answer the other four questions. This question was answered with a varying degree of completeness and sophistication. But all the respondents seemed to grasp the main idea. Only one respondent cited biblical references other than Micah 6:8 as being helpful in understanding the big idea. All listed the local school equity issue as an **example** that helped make the main idea clear to them. Others listed both the schools and the story about Senator Ervin reading from Micah as helpful examples. One respondent felt the Medicare and school examples helped bring home the main idea to him/her. Most felt that the main idea could be best **applied** to the local school situation. The **action** that most would take in response to the sermon would be to be more involved in local issues and hold officials accountable for making the schools more just.

In trying to determine why this sermon seemed to be so well received, I thought of many possible reasons. The school issue was on everyone’s minds. This showed me

the importance of timing for this type of sermon. A week after the sermon was delivered the county commissions reached a compromise by an overwhelming vote because of the public uproar. In addition, the sermon was less academic than the subsequent ones. This was the first of four sermons on social justice and that may have had an impact.

Responses to Sermon Two

The second sermon based on Amos 5:21-24, also received positive responses. The respondents all got the big idea. Some explained the main idea and other answers with more details than did other participants. All referred to the Amos 5:21-24 and its language as the most helpful biblical reference in understanding the main idea. Everyone listed as the most helpful **example**, the story about divestment in South Africa and the how the seminarians turned pastors acted selfishly when it could take money out of their own pocket. Most felt a local **application** would be more equitable wages. They were offended that CEO's were making extravagant salaries while workers were not receiving a fair wages. Others noted the great disparity between the standard of living in countries such as our own and those in the third world. A few indicated we should be more welcoming to immigrants coming to our community for a better life. The **action** response suggested by all the respondents was getting more involved in issues and prodding elected officials to look out for the poor. One person felt that by acting locally "one day it will make a difference globally". A few hoped or prayed for the courage to respond, which indicated how challenging it is for some to know just what to do next. "(I could respond by) picking up the courage to get involved in speaking up against injustice and doing so by using my life as an example."

Responses to Sermon Three

The answers indicated that everyone was able to identify the main idea of the sermon and answer all the other questions. However, there was a wide variance in the completeness of the answers. Some answers were just a few words. In contrast, others seemed to thoroughly understand just about all biblical references, examples, and were able to apply the sermon. This was also true with the responses detailing actions contemplated as a result of the sermon. A few folks felt the low-tech visual aid or prop; the hamburger bun was a helpful **example**. “Where’s the beef?” “Where’s the works?” Only a few commented on the Lutheran stress on justification by grace through faith. One person wrote, “We demonstrate our love and faith by our good works. This is not a contradiction of the doctrine of salvation through faith.”

Throughout the sermon surveys, especially at this point, it seemed that this preacher was addressing two audiences. It raised some questions. Are my sermons too nuanced or cluttered for this audience? Am I wandering too much from the big idea with convoluted references? Do I need to “dumb down” my sermons or make them clearer or simpler? Was my sermon speaking to my audience or my seminary professors? This is a dilemma. This preacher’s congregation has both prolific readers with graduate degrees and many who are taxed reading the newspaper. I need to reach both groups. This is something I will reflect on and take seriously.

Responses to Sermon Four

All seemed to grasp the big idea with a few giving very sophisticated and thoughtful answers. These later respondents dealt with the interplay with the criteria for judging in Matthew 25, the whole counsel of scripture and the Lutheran confessions by making clear that Matthew 25 does not work mechanically. “God is the final judge. We are called by Matthew 25 to show compassion for the least of these. This parable’s warning is very important but we do not earn our salvation.” Another said, “We need to help the least of these. But grace from God will get us into heaven, not our good works.” The parable of the judgment of the sheep and the goats was the most helpful biblical reference or story in understanding the sermon’s main idea. A few also listed several other biblical references mentioned in the sermon. All who responded felt the most helpful **example** was the letter from the pregnant woman without food.

The responses to how the big idea could be **applied** locally and globally resulted in several leaving the answer blank. The others responded by mentioning supporting local and global relief agencies. One person included also working to fight the aids pandemic in Africa. Another mentioned welcoming our neighbors including those who worship and believe differently than us. This seemed timely in that our neighboring Baptist congregation moved and the building now houses the Muslim American Society.

No respondent wrote about taking **action** that would bring about structural changes that would help to make it possible to get at the causes of poverty. Also there was no mention of joining or working with organizations to bring about systemic change. Folks indicated responses that would be compassionate or charitable in nature such as supporting local food banks with money and service. Most coupled this proposed action

on a local level with an intention to support international relief agencies. Of all the four sermons, this one was intentionally the least directive. A special effort was made to avoid advocating a particular course of action or program. The sermon would have been better if it had fewer quotations from scholars. It came across as a little stilted or too academic especially for this congregation.

My Own Personal Reaction To The Project

I was disappointed that participants in the project came with an apparent inability to connect the Bible to social justice. This should not have been surprising in that most had rarely heard sermons on social justice. There was some growth in making the connection between the biblical mandate for social justice and the listener's contemporary world. While there was growth in openness to social justice sermons, parishioners did not seem to understand much about the structural dimensions of injustice. In the future I need to make more use of stories of people victimized or trapped by poverty and structural injustice. I need to make more use of emotion and not try to just use logic or attempt to build a well-constructed biblical case for social justice. For example, as part of a sermon I could interview an articulate homeless person who does not fit the stereotype. Having someone briefly speak who has been trapped mostly by circumstances would be more effective than quoting a denominational social statement on poverty.

I now realize that it will take much more than four sermons to make a significant impact on my congregation's growth in understanding and living out principles of biblical social justice. The sermons were delivered on four consecutive Sundays. It may

have been more beneficial to have spread out the sermons more. Bible studies with social justice themes would be helpful. It would also be beneficial to have adult forums where people can be exposed to speakers who can provide opportunities for compassionate service and social justice advocacy. Even though we are a small church, I feel it would be practical and effective to have presentations from well respected Christian and community organizations who are working for a more just society. The Mennonite's and Quaker's witness for peace as well as the Catholic Campaign for Human Development and Evangelicals for Social Action are examples of this.

I realize because of demographics, worldview, personal histories, political perspectives, and other factors that my church may not be the most fertile ground to plant the seeds of biblical social justice. But I am prepared to make a sustained effort to do just that. I did not encounter the resistance to social justice sermons that I expected. No one complained that they were being manipulated or being pushed to make a particular decision to think or act a certain way. This may be because I made a concerted effort to avoid stridency and to speak the truth in love. At times I worried that I may not have been forceful enough. On the other hand, I did not want to appear to be promoting an agenda. Duane Litfin warned about the "The Perils of Persuasive Preaching". Too much pressure on persuading the listener to adopt a course of action can potentially cause a false result.²⁶⁴ The Holy Spirit has to be trusted. It is not my job to bring about a specific result. As Father Walter J. Burghart, S.J. wrote in his introduction to *Preaching the Just*

²⁶⁴ Duane Litfin, "The Perils of Persuasive Preaching" in *Christianity Today*, Volume 21 (February 4, 1977).

Word, that the goal is not to find solutions but to “raise consciousness [and] stimulate awareness.”²⁶⁵

An unexpected result of this project was the profound effect biblical social justice had on me personally. I remember reading the preacher must first have a conversion experience and that “preachers must be set aflame”.²⁶⁶ When I first read this they were just words. At some point this stopped me a project to be completed. I came to understand what it means to have a topic you feel passionately about. I feel a call to speak and act for the oppressed. After this project is completed, I will focus more strongly on discerning what to do with my passion for social justice. As I move closer to the conventional retirement age, I want to transition into a situation where I can preach, teach, and act for social justice. This could be connecting with a clergy group working for social justice and connecting with a community development and advocacy group. I am going to explore doing pulpit exchanges in order to preach to different congregations on social justice.

Interim ministry provides another possible way to preach on social justice to different congregations. I am going to investigate writing a short article for our denomination’s publication, *The Lutheran*. Finally, I am going to contact some Lutheran seminary professors about speaking to their classes on preaching social justice. Serving as a pastor-in-residence at the seminary for a week would give an opportunity to speak about preaching social justice even if it is just at the coffee table. It seems I got more out the sermons than I ever expected.

²⁶⁵ Walter J. Burghardt, S.J., *Preaching the Just Word* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), IX.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, X.

APPENDIX ONE

FOUR SERMONS ON SOCIAL JUSTICE

Note: These sermons on social justice were developed and preached at St. Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church on four consecutive Sundays in July and August 2006. They focus on the biblical call to seek social justice and applying the biblical mandate with just actions within the listener's own context.

Sermon One

“Walking with the Poor” Micah 6:6-8.

I was about ninety miles northwest of here on a beautiful day in 1980 in Morganton, NC. The Burke County courthouse, nestled in the beautiful foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, buzzed with excitement. Courthouse clerks poked their heads out of offices to watch the dignitaries arriving from afar. I only had to take a few steps from the district court room, where I often presided as a judge, to the adjoining courtroom in which the ceremony would take place. It was a day of great pride for everyone in the packed court room as North Carolina Superior Court Judge Sam Ervin III, a humble Morganton native, was about to be sworn in as a judge of the United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit. President Jimmy Carter had appointed Judge Ervin to a judicial position right below the United States Supreme Court. There was electricity in the air as former United States Senator Sam Ervin, Jr. stood to present his son to take the oath of office. Just a half dozen years earlier the senator captivated the nation as chairman of the Senate Watergate Hearings. Back in 1974 he was just about the most popular and admired man in America. The nation was glued to their TV sets as his committee unearthed the illegal activities and abuses of power by the Nixon White House. In front of national television, Chairman Ervin interrogated witnesses and charmed the nation with rustic expressions. He was fond of saying in a thick southern drawl that he was just a country lawyer when in truth he was a brilliant graduate of Harvard law school and a former associate justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court.

As retired Senator Ervin slowly moved his creaky eighty-four year old body to the center of the courtroom, his crooked arthritic hands clutched a well-worn book. It turned out to be his family Bible passed down by his ancestors. In his unforgettable southern accent as thick as molasses he read with conviction from the prophet Micah. “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Soon after those words stopped echoing in the courtroom, Judge Sam J. Ervin III put his hand on that family Bible and was sworn into office

Ironically, Senator Sam Ervin the self-described country lawyer was quoting a country prophet named Micah. We don’t know much about this country prophet because his book contains almost no personal references or historical information. We have to look at Jeremiah 26:18 to know that Micah came from Moresheth, located in the foothills in the country outside of Jerusalem. We learn also from Jeremiah that Micah prophesied during the reign of King Hezekiah of Judah about 701 B.C. before Judah was invaded by Assyria. Micah may have been a judge but not in our contemporary understanding. Micah, the country prophet, may have been one of the elders in his hometown of Moresheth who sat in on cases to help render a decision. He may have also periodically served on the court of the king in Jerusalem to help decide disputes. This would help to explain Micah’s acute awareness of the graft and corruption of public officials as well as the cheating and defrauding of the common citizens by the merchants and leaders in Jerusalem.

Micah could not stand the corruption he saw in the big city of Jerusalem. Like the prophets Amos, Hosea and Isaiah, Micah wanted not only purity of worship of God but social justice as well. He felt so passionate about the moral corruption and misdeeds by

officials and the business establishment that he bluntly denounced those wrong doers and their evil deeds. Convinced that God spoke through him, he fearlessly prophesied the destruction of the country including Jerusalem. Unlike some of the professional prophets, Micah could not be influenced by political patronage. In Micah 3:5 he derided the prophets whose messages were crafted to please those who put food into their mouths. His stinging words show his passion and disgust with leaders of Israel and Judah. In graphic detail in chapter three he accuses the leadership of being ignorant of justice and oppressing the common everyday people. He calls out the leaders who “who tear the skin off my people, flay the skin off them, break their bones in pieces, and chop them like meat in a kettle, like fish in a caldron.”

Micah’s antipathy towards the injustice he saw in places like Jerusalem cannot be explained simply by his being from the country. His opposition to the actions of those in Jerusalem and his prophesying its destruction can be traced to the theology of the exodus. He was not versed in court theology but his rustic roots may have exposed him instead to the theology of the exodus. Micah did not hesitate to speak out against injustice or to predict the destruction of Jerusalem. He believed God would intervene in history and destroy the powerful for oppressing the people.

The prophet’s passion and bluntness in speaking out against unjust practices by the powerful stems from his unwavering conviction that he spoke on God’s behalf. Unlike the corrupt officials and prophets whose message was for sale, Micah truly was convinced that God had called and empowered him to prophetically preach justice. “But as for me, I am filled with power, with the spirit of the Lord and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin” (Micah 3:8). The prophet

chided those who stayed awake in their beds at night conjuring up evil ways to abuse their power in the morning (Micah 2:1). He made clear that he spoke on God's behalf and that God would not tolerate people being cheated with false weights and measures (Micah 6:11).

In pivotal chapter six, Micah depicts God calling Israel before a court of justice. God is both the plaintiff, the one filing the complaint, and also the judge deciding the case. Israel is called to explain her lack of faithfulness and forgetting God's gracious acts dating back to the time of Moses. God makes specific his complaint or indictment against "my people" listing his mighty acts of compassion which Israel failed to remember (Micah 6:1-5).

In Micah 6:6-8, the focus shifts and it becomes clear that the question is being addressed to all of us and that means us each of us sitting right here this morning. This section is not ancient history, it has universal application. Micah here uses the word "I", not "my people". God is speaking to each of us. The question is what does God expect of us and the list escalates from simple offerings, to extravagant sacrifices such as thousands of rivers of oil, and finally offering up our first-born child as a sacrifice. Verse eight gives us God's answer of what is expected of each and every one of us. "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

How would you respond if God called you before the bar of justice and asked you if you have met the Lord's requirements? Can you say that you do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God? You might raise a defense that this is a different time and that you live in Charlotte, North Carolina instead of Micah's Jerusalem in the eighth

century B.C. But every community, country, and economic system stands under God's judgment. The truth is that today, as well as in Micah's time, everyday people and the poor are being victimized by those who lie awake at night devising their evil schemes. Let me give you an example of one of these schemes. According to Tuesday's *New York Times*, the pharmaceutical industry has found that poor people are a lucrative market to target. By some legislative trickery the drug companies will have a potential windfall profit of \$ 2 billion or more this year. To do this 6.5 million low-income elderly folks along with younger people who were disabled were automatically placed into the drug coverage of Medicare Part D. It is more complicated but basically the drug companies will gain hundreds of millions of dollars because congress passed a law in 2003 that bars the government from receiving the best price rebate that they were required to give the states under the Medicaid program that previously applied. This is not a partisan issue. Congress looks after the drug companies instead of the poor, the elderly, and the disable. Micah challenges us to do justice and that that legislation is not just.²⁶⁷

What can you do about this example? We can do justice by holding our government officials accountable. After studying issues, we can decide if our elected officials are doing justice. Are they practicing the biblical principles articulated by Micah, the other prophets and our Lord and savior Jesus Christ? We do justice when we make our governmental officials accountable for acting justly.

On the local level this past week our county commissioners did not do justice, show a love of kindness or a willingness to walk humbly with God. We don't have time to trace all the details of how our schools got broken and the documented lack of trust between the races. A new school superintendent was brought in and our school board

²⁶⁷ Milt Freudenheim, "A Windfall From Shifts To Medicare," *New York Times*, 18 July 2006, sec. C, 1-2.

voted seven to one to adopt a plan to fix the schools. The plan was based on a broad-based study committee's recommendation calling for new schools for the suburbs that are overflowing from dramatic growth and for renovating decaying inner city schools. Everyone was not happy but a consensus was reached and when the school board voted all the kids won. But last Tuesday, the county commission defeated the recommendation of the very committee they appointed and ignored the school board's vote. The common good was ignored and everyone lost with no new schools and no renovations scheduled. The inner city commissioners thought the package tilted towards the suburbs and the suburban commissioners felt their needs were being ignored. Each faction acted selfishly. There was political posturing and a chance to unite the community behind the schools was missed.

What has this got to do with my faith? Again we can hold our elected officials accountable. We can demand justice, equity in facilities, and quality instruction for all our public school students. Every public school student is created in the image of God. The quality of our childrens' education should not depend upon their zip code. We need to call upon our county commissioners to stop demonizing each other and turning the inner city and the suburbs against each other. Suburban students should not attend overcrowded schools and the inner-city students should not have to go to schools with run down facilities.

A statement of the Social Principles on Education from the United Methodist Church helps explain why we are called to do something about our schools. "At a time when public education has become a political battleground, the church is called to remember, first and foremost, the well-being of all God's children. Our church believes

that public schools are the primary route for most children into full participation in our economic, political, and community life. We have the moral responsibility to support, strengthen, and reform public schools as to better serve our children and country.

Undoubtedly, Public Schools have been and continue to be both an avenue of opportunity and a major cohesive force in our society, a society becoming daily more diverse racially, culturally, and religiously.”²⁶⁸

The Gospel calls us to promote social justice both as individuals and as members of society. Missionary E. Stanley Jones has written, “An individual gospel without a social gospel is a soul without a body, and a social gospel without an individual gospel is a body without a soul. One is a ghost and the other is a corpse.”²⁶⁹ We are called to open our own hearts to doing justice, loving kindness, and to walking humble with our God. We do this by transforming our own hearts and working to transform the community we live in including its unjust structures.

I don’t have all the answers for you. I too struggle with what specifically God would have me do. Together we can try to grow in our understanding of justice issues, becoming better-informed citizens, and listening for God’s voice and direction in our lives. As we listen for God’s voice through silence, Bible study, and by talking with other Christians we can develop a spirituality of justice. Everyone cannot be a prophet or a vocal advocate for justice. But we can find a way to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God.

²⁶⁸ “Education”, in *The Social Principles: The Political Community* #164, General Board of Church and Society, United Methodist Church; www.umc-gbcs.org; accessed 19 July 2006.

²⁶⁹ E. Stanley Jones cited in “What is True Religion?”; www.micahchallenge.org.au. Accessed 19 July 2006.

It will take courage to walk against the wind. There will be criticism as we speak out against injustice and walk with the poor. But we are called by God and challenged by the prophet Micah to speak out against injustice. Part of our call is to discern how God wants us to do work for justice. Sometimes justice requires us to criticize our government and to hold our elected officials accountable for doing justice. But we can do this in a loving and kind manner. This doesn't preclude demanding accountability or even being confrontational if necessary. Walk humbly though and don't be self-righteous or mean spirited with those we disagree with. As Paul writes in Ephesians 4:18 we are to speak the truth in love. No matter how diligent or earnest we are in studying issues and seeking discernment from God, we still can get it wrong.

I hope I have not overwhelmed you. Putting our faith into action by working for justice will be challenging. Just because doing justice can be difficult is not an excuse to do nothing and allow injustice to prevail. Remember God calls us to do only what is possible where we are planted here in a changing neighborhood. We are not alone. The Lord who calls us to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God will not abandon us. Micah announced what the Lord requires of us. We remember though that only one person has ever totally lived out those attributes, our savior Jesus Christ. We do not seek justice alone, Jesus has promised to be with us always.

Amen

Sermon Two

“True Worship” Amos 5:21-24.

During seminary I got to meet an inspirational couple, Pastor Simon and Reginah Farisani from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of South Africa. Pastor Farisani was imprisoned and tortured by the South Africa government for his activities in opposing the racist practice of apartheid. The remarkable thing about this courageous pastor was his lack of bitterness. He was willing to forgive those who tortured him while still holding them accountable. My wife Anne invited Pastor Farisani’s wife Reginah over to our seminary apartment for lunch. She shared with us that when her husband was imprisoned the South African secret police sent people to her home posing as victims of apartheid asking her to help them. But her husband had warned her that this might happen. The police wanted to entrap and imprison her so that her husband would turn on those who were fighting apartheid in order to get his wife out of prison.

The whole community at Trinity Lutheran Seminary was energized to fight apartheid and to end the oppression of the black majority by minority white South African government. We vowed to do everything we could to let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream. Our efforts consisted of calling for divestment of stock of companies that did business as usual with the South African government. Some students went to the South African embassy in Washington, D.C. to protest and be arrested for trespassing and then be released right after booking. Others lobbied our congressional representatives and U.S. Senators to put pressure on South Africa economically and politically. It seemed invigorating to have a cause with the forces of evil and the forces of good so clearly defined. We were getting to fight both the

individual evil and structural evil of the South African apartheid government and its economic system that exploited its black citizens. We wore t-shirts and sang South African folk songs calling for justice. All of us felt we were on the side of the angels.

A funny thing happened about a year later. Our church decided to give pastors the option of putting their individual pensions in a social purpose fund that did not invest in South Africa. The purpose was to economically pressure the South African government to end Apartheid. Some of my friends who were so self-righteously indignant about others doing business with South Africa were now in a different situation. No longer students, they were pastors with a pension plan that required them to make a choice that could cost them money. I remember one friend called me to explain the pension plan to him. He was not willing to risk putting his pension plan into the social purpose fund. Apartheid did finally end and divestment did help make that happen. There was also an ironic justice. The social purpose fund out-performed the fund that kept investing in South Africa. Those who put their money where their mouth was made more money on their pension investment plan. A few years later when Pastor Farisani spoke at our synod assembly, I could not help but wonder how many of the pastors present had put their pension funds at risk fighting injustice.

Something similar happened back in the 8th century B.C. after God called Amos to be a prophet. Amos came from the tiny hamlet of Tekoa in Judah. He described himself as a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees whom God called to prophesy to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The country was at the zenith of its political and economic power under King Jeroboam II. The people felt that God had blessed them and they took great pride in themselves forgetting it was God who made them so prosperous.

The rich lavished themselves with every possible luxury as they trampled on the poor. Amos was convinced that God had called him to speak against injustice and he did not speak gently. When Amos called out neighboring countries for their sinfulness he would say, “Thus says the Lord.” The people loved it when Amos criticized injustice in surrounding countries. But Israel did not like it when Amos applied those same standards of accountability to Israel. It reminded me of the seminary situation. Its okay to be critical of someone else but don’t apply the same standard to me. Amos denounced Israel saying that “they sell the righteous for silver and trample the needy for a pair of sandals (Amos 2:6b). Amos warned Israel that God would judge them severely. He called the over-indulged rich women cows who will be taken away with hooks for oppressing the poor and needy (Amos 4:1-2). He warned Israel to repent before it was too late. Amos called on the people to “hate evil and love good, and establish justice at the gate...” (Amos 5:15). If they repented and acted justly, God might spare them. It is easy to criticize other countries but it takes a courageous prophet to speak God’s word of judgment to his own people.

In one of the most famous passages on biblical justice, Amos told the people of Israel that God was not at all impressed with their superficial worship. God could not be bought off to look away from their oppression of the poor. “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream” (Amos 5:21-24).

Amos 5:24 goes to the very core of the prophet's message and it has universal application. It applies to us today in North Carolina just as much as it applied to the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the 8th century B.C. We are also called to let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everyflowing stream. You don't have to go to Calcutta to see abject poverty and economic injustice. There are plenty of homeless families here in prosperous Charlotte. The authenticity of our worship can be measured by how we respond to human need and to the cry of the poor and most vulnerable. Lutheran Family Services in the Carolinas, an agency you have worked closely with to help foster children, has updated its mission statement to refer to empowering and advocating for the most vulnerable. If LFS encounters injustice, they have pledged to advocate for a change in public policy as well work for societal change. Martin Luther in his explanation of the commandment against stealing warned about the consequences of ignoring the cries of the poor. "They will have an effect too heavy for you and all the world to bear, for they will reach God, who watches over the poor, sorrowful hearts, and he will not leave them unavenged."²⁷⁰

Determining how we will help the poor and let justice roll will not be easy. We may not agree on the exact specifics of letting justice roll down like waters. But if we identify need and injustices, that is a start. As Christians we can discuss these issues and discern God's will and determine what actions we will take as individuals and as a church. For example, our state legislature has recently enacted a law increasing the minimum wage. Employers in North Carolina will have to pay above the current federal minimum wage level. Congress has been opposed to increasing the minimum wage.

²⁷⁰ Quoted in Foster R. McCurley, *Go in Peace, Serve the Lord: The Social Ministry of the Church* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2000), 50.

Because of increasing public support for a federal minimum wage increase, some members of congress are reconsidering their opposition to an increase. Regrettably, some have conceded anonymously that their motivation is political survival rather than a change of heart. Solutions to economic issues are very complicated. The book *Nickle and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* describes what life is like for the working poor who clean our hotel rooms, wait on us at lunch, or serve us at Wal-Mart. You might not agree with Barbara Ehrenreich's analysis, but it will make you think and feel the pain of the working poor who struggle to get by. Our own denomination, the E.L.C.A., published a study on economic life, *Give Us This Day: Sufficient, Sustainable, Livelihood for All*. It called for us to be less selfish and to seek economic justice for the common good. The biblically- driven document urges us to not just be spectators but participants in seeking justice and helping to determine how economic decisions are made in our community.

A recent newspaper article noted that everyone is not equally profiting from our country's economic growth. It cited 2004 census figures showing that the purchasing power of most people actually fell. The ranks of the poor and uninsured swelled. The top 1% had real income increases of at least 12.5% while the rest of us only had an increase of 1.5%.²⁷¹ It seems to me that not only justice but our own economic self-interest would cause us to want to hold our government accountable for giving us a more equitable share of our economy's growth. We can ask if any proposed legislation or current law is just and if it serves the common good or if it unjustly enriches the wealthy. If we do not demand that justice roll down like waters, who will?

²⁷¹ Paul Krugman, "Left Behind Economics," *New York Times*, 14 July 2006, sec. A, p.19.

Amos spoke harshly against those who cheated the poor. He knew that God was angry at the lack of true worship and the exploitation of the poor by the rich. The prophet did not preach because he was a member of some Tekoa think-tank. Amos' call for justice was not about ethics, political theory or economic pondering. Amos preached justice because he spoke for God. Amos was called from his flock of sheep. God said: "Go, prophecy to my people Israel."

I believe my own call is to lead our congregation to prayerfully discern how we can truly worship with our actions and not just on Sunday mornings. How can we let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream? We can't do it alone. God and the Holy Spirit are here to guide us. We look to the example of our Lord Jesus Christ who came and preached about the coming Kingdom of God. By studying God's word we can come to see that letting justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream is a central part of God's plan. Jesus came to bring Good News to the poor (Luke 4:18) as well as going to the cross to give us eternal life (John 3:16). There is no dichotomy between salvation and seeking justice. God wants us to use the full counsel of scripture. Jesus continued the work of prophets such as Amos, Micah, Jeremiah and others. He died on the cross to redeem us and to help us to restore our broken world. When we seek justice we are doing the work of the kingdom.

We live in a broken and fallen world. In his book, *Not The Way Its Supposed to Be*, Cornelius Plantinga describes why things are the way they are. He concludes that there are many ways we can avoid taking responsibility and escape working to make the world the way that God intended it to be. One way is "to shut one's eyes to an injustice,

to look the other way, to pretend ignorance of evil---to do these things is to connive.”²⁷²

Another way is “cocooning” staying in our little world with our friends and avoiding thinking about such things as injustice.²⁷³ Another way is to “amuse ourselves to death” by numbing our minds with television and other distractions.²⁷⁴ These are just a few of the ways of avoiding thinking about trying to make things the way God wants them to be.

Discerning together how we can practice true worship and let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream will be challenging. We cannot do it alone. But we can begin today to commit ourselves to work together for justice and righteousness. We can continue the work that Jesus began to restore our world to the way it used to be and the way God wants it to be. The first chapter of Genesis tells us that God saw that each aspect of creation was good. God can help to guide us to take some concrete steps to make this a more just world until that great day when the kingdom fully comes and it will be all good once again.

Plantinga gives us hope for the challenge ahead. “To place ourselves in the range of God’s choicest gifts, we have to walk with God, lean on God, cling to God, and come to have the sense and feel of God, refer all things to God. Contrary to our self-interested impulses, we have to worship God with a disciplined spirit and an expectant heart.”²⁷⁵

I cannot tell you what you should do to let justice roll like waters. But I can tell you that God is counting on us to worship purely and to work to let justice and righteousness flow freely. God will help us to find the role we will play best. Instead of

²⁷² Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. , *Not The Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 182

²⁷³ Ibid., 188

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 190.

²⁷⁵ Ibid. 195.

being a burden, this can become a joy. “To be a responsible person is to find one’s role and then funded by the grace of God, to fill this role and to delight in it.” ²⁷⁶

Amen

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 197

Sermon Three

“Faith without Works” James 2:14-17.

We don’t hear a lot about James in the Lutheran Church. The book of James was such an anathema to Martin Luther that he called it “an epistle of straw.” Thank God James is now accepted as part of the canon of scripture by Protestants. Like the prophet Amos 800 years earlier, James condemned showing favoritism to the rich while treating the poor with disdain. James warns against putting out the red carpet at worship for the rich and at same time disrespecting the poor (James 2:1-8). He tells us that we are to fulfill the scriptural royal law that says: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

While James may not use the actual word “justice” as Amos did, he is also calling us to work for justice. James was upset at the shabby way his Christian brothers and sisters treated the poor. They were claiming to have faith but their actions did not match their words. Dorothy Day, the famous Catholic social activist, learned to judge people by what they did, not by what they said. “I have long since come to believe that people mean half of what they say, and that it is best to disregard their talk and judge only by their actions.”²⁷⁷ James calls us to put our faith into action and to not just talk. “But be doers of the word, and not hearers who deceive themselves” (James 1:22).

James asked pointedly, how we can claim to have faith if we don’t feed our hungry sister and brother and if we don’t clothe them when they are naked. “What good is it brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith without works, is dead” (James 2:14-17).

Jesus taught that we would be measured by our actions on behalf of the most vulnerable in society. Jesus told the parable of the king whose criteria for judging people was the way they treated the hungry and the poor. There were dire consequences for those who did not show mercy to those in need. “‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or in prison, and did not take care of you? Then he will answer them, ‘Truly, I tell you just as you did not do it to the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matthew 25:44-46).

Our basis for putting our faith into action should not be a calculated attempt to rack up celestial brownie points. Works is definitely not a ladder to climb up into heaven. But James is right when he tells us that faith without works is dead. We Lutherans are so focused on the doctrine of justification by grace through faith that critics sometimes ask where are our works. It reminds me of the old Wendy’s hamburger commercial when a customer lifts up the bun covering a competitor’s puny hamburger and asks, “Where is the beef?”

Where are our works? This is a legitimate question. If we say we have faith, then where are our works? James is calling us to a practical faith that manifests itself in deeds and not just words. He also calls us to give justice to the poor, the same emphasis that is found the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Faith and works are like love and marriage; they go naturally together.

True faith is not just having the right doctrine. We Lutherans often get it wrong. When we celebrate Reformation Sunday at the end of October, I get goose bumps as we sing *A Mighty Fortress is Our God* and hear the gospel’s unconditional promise. We

²⁷⁷ Dorothy Day cited in “What is True Religion?” WWW.MicahChallenge.org.au accessed 19 July 2006.

hear again that we all sin and fall short of the glory of God. Paul's words and Luther's teaching reminds us that we are justified by grace through faith. But out of fear of being accused of works righteousness, we too often stop there. Where is the beef? Where are our works? Sometimes I think our Lutheran theology has become an excuse for doing nothing. We don't want to be confused with our arrogant caricatures of emotional fundamentalists or guilt-ridden Catholics. Faith does not just believe in the right doctrine. Carl Braaten, the Lutheran theologian, writes that by intellectualizing our faith, we are in danger of distorting it to the degree that we don't really believe in faith by grace alone. Our salvation is based on a doctrine "rather than faith in the gracious love of God in Jesus Christ."²⁷⁸

On October 31, 1999 over 500 years after Martin Luther started the argument to reform the church by posting his 95 theses, the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran church entered into an agreement setting forth their mutual understanding of the role of faith and works. "By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping us and calling us to good works."²⁷⁹

When we do the good works of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and working for a more just society we do it not out of fear or to seek a reward. We seek to do good works in grateful response to our salvation through Jesus death on the cross for us. God gives us the grace to grow and to do our part to help bring in the Kingdom of God that Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Jesus incarnated compassion and love of justice. When Jesus began his public ministry, he quoted the

²⁷⁸ Carl E. Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 118.

prophet Isaiah. “I have come to bring good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18-22). Jesus taught that the greatest commandment is to love God completely and our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:37-38). In the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus taught us who our neighbor is. When Jesus finished telling about the mercy of the Good Samaritan, he told us “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37).

The way we can respond to Jesus’ teaching and his death on the cross is to do good works. Christian faith is about putting our faith into action by doing what Jesus taught. Jesus said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). All the synoptic Gospels - Matthew, Mark, and Luke - reflect that Jesus calls us to reach out to our brothers and sisters in need. Love is about concrete action for those in need, not just some inner warm feeling. “Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action” (1 John 3:18).

Jesus took up where the prophets left off. Our lord heard and answered the cry of the poor and oppressed. He incarnated love of God and love of neighbor. Jesus calls us to do like wise. Mark Powell, Lutheran New Testament scholar, wrote about our role in his book *Loving Jesus*. “We exist as a church to worship God and love Jesus, and the way we worship God and love Jesus is by living the way that God wants us to live and doing the work that Jesus would have us do.”²⁸⁰ Are you willing to show that you love Jesus by your actions? Are you willing to show that your faith is a living faith that produces good works?

Again our works even for the poor and for social justice are not a ladder to heaven. Part of loving Jesus is doing what Jesus calls us to do out of our relationship

²⁷⁹ Quoted in John L. Allen, Jr., “Ratzinger credited with saving Lutheran pact” in *National Catholic Reporter*, September 10, 1999; www.st-francis.org; accessed 8 August 2006.

with him instead of always calculating what is in it for us. Lutherans do not always get it wrong. Out of the love of Jesus and our neighbor, Lutheran Services in America provided last year over 8 billion dollars in services to those in need. That is more than the combined efforts of Catholic Charities and the Salvation Army. Our congregation has been proud to be part of that effort. As we grow in grace I challenge you to grow in putting our faith into action. As James teaches us, faith without works is dead.

The New Testament is not a blueprint for a perfect society. It calls for no specific political or economic program. Instead it is up to us to discern how we will apply God's word and put our faith into action. Clearly the Old Testament prophets, the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament call us to work for the poor and to bring about a more just society. It will take prayer, Bible study and God's grace to determine how to best put our faith into action. James and his brother Jesus make clear that helping our brothers and sisters in need is not just an option. It is God's will. It is God's command. Can I count on you to show where the beef is, where the work is, and that your faith is not dead but alive? Can Jesus count on you to be a doer of the word and not just a hearer?

Amen

(After reviewing this sermon, it seems less focused than the others. It gets away from James and what he says about the poor.)

²⁸⁰ Mark Allan Powell, *Loving Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 179.

Sermon Four

“To the least of these” Matthew 25:31-46.

She wasn't in the habit of asking for help. But circumstances pushed her up against the wall. Listen to her account. “My husband and I both work 40 hour-a-week jobs. We are expecting our third child and due to gestational hypertension, which leads to pre-clampsyia, I have been taken out of work and placed on strict bed rest. Our income dropped drastically. I only get \$1,000 a month now, down from almost \$3,000 a month. The times, or should I say everyday living, has gotten so rough that I sometimes go to bed without eating to make sure my two children eat. I pray the child inside me will be okay. Often times I send my son to school without food and money because we don't have any. We didn't have any money or food left and we didn't know how we were going to feed our kids.”²⁸¹ She then prayed for guidance.

Her story is not unusual and many throughout the world are actually in worse circumstances. Women and children are homeless and starving to death throughout the world. The reason the woman's story got my attention was because she lives right here in our own city. Like many of the working poor she is just a paycheck or two away from going to bed hungry. Some questions might come to your mind. You may wonder why I am bringing this to your attention. After all this is not your job. You are not a social worker and certainly not a social engineer who can help retool our economy or reconfigure our social welfare system. It may not be your job to help with the most vulnerable in society who fall through the society's safety net, but it is your calling to do so. This is your baptismal vocation to help those in need. In our Lutheran tradition,

²⁸¹ “A Testimonial From a Client,” *The Fishnet*, (newsletter of Loaves and Fishes, Charlotte, NC), Summer 2006. , 1.

when an infant is still damp from the waters of baptism a meaningful ritual occurs. The parents receive a lighted candle on behalf of the child and these words of Jesus are spoken. “Let your light shine before others, so that may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

One day when Jesus comes in his glory surrounded by angels we will be judged by him. According to Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus’ criteria for judging us will be what we have done or have not done for the least of these, the most vulnerable and needy. In this parable Jesus said the king will send to eternal punishment those who failed to help those in need. “For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink. I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison, and you did not visit me”(Matthew 25:42-43). The surprised people will ask when. They can’t remember not feeding the king or denying him his other needs. But the king has a startling answer for the condemned ones. “Just as you did not do it to the least of these, you did not do it to me” (Matthew 25:45).

Clearly this text shows how important it is to Jesus that we meet the real bodily needs of the hungry and the marginalized. But it is not as simple as you have eternal life or eternal punishment based on how you treat the least of these. The biblical scholars do not agree on some aspects of today’s passage. In Jesus’ parable of the last judgment, some experts interpret the text to mean the entire human race. Other New Testament scholars say the Gentiles or pagans are those judged. There is also disagreement over what the phrase “the least of these” means. It can mean the most vulnerable or can be interpreted to mean Christian missionaries. What is most important is to realize that Jesus is judging the Gentiles or pagans on the basis of how they care for or do not care for the

least of these. In the end all of us Christian, Jew, and Gentile will be judged by the criteria of what we did or did not do for the least of these. As to the least of these Jesus may be offering encouragement to the missionaries that are being sent out in his name. The text makes clear that Jesus gives criteria for judging all of us on the basis of how we treat the needs of the most vulnerable in society.

Jesus the lord of lords, the king of kings who will sit in judgment of us all clearly teaches us that he identifies with the naked, the hungry, the friendless, the imprisoned, the thirsty, and the sick. When we help the weakest, we help Jesus who gave up his heavenly power to be one of us. As judge of the world, Jesus identifies with the powerless as he did in his earthly ministry. Jesus' life modeled compassion and as his followers we are called to do the same. Remember, Jesus said at the end of the parable of the merciful Good Samaritan, "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10: 37).

Jesus judges by compassion. He preached and taught compassion. In his first sermon, Jesus said he had come to bring good news to the poor and to let the oppressed go free (Luke 4:18-19). Jesus was asked by John's messenger if he was the one to come, meaning the messiah. Jesus said: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them" (Matthew 11:3-5). Jesus' ministry certainly testified to his compassion for all people. Since Jesus showed such compassion towards the marginalized and needy people, surely he would expect no less from us.

It is tempting to think about this text in an almost mechanical way. Feed the hungry and clothe the naked and have eternal life. Fail to feed, clothe, visit and welcome and you will have eternal punishment. But a close look at the text tells us that it is not

that simple. Remember the great surprise of the Gentiles who feed the hungry and clothed the naked. They did these acts out of compassion not knowing it was the lord they were helping. When the Gentiles or pagans related to the poor and hungry they were entering unknowingly into a relationship with Jesus.

This text raises questions as to who will be saved and who will not be. This text is not a complete teaching on salvation. We need to look at the whole counsel of Scripture. God's forgiveness for the sake of his son Jesus and the role of grace are found elsewhere in the scriptures. Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us of the importance of looking at the Bible holistically. "The Scripture is a whole and every word, every sentence possesses such multiple relationships with the whole that it is impossible always to keep the whole in view when listening to the details."²⁸² One thing is clear, there are going to be some surprises on judgment day!

As a confessional Lutheran I believe that salvation is exclusively through Jesus Christ. Our interpretation of Scripture and confessional writings teach us that we do not earn our salvation by any works or merit on our own. This means that just feeding the hungry and clothing the naked or even coming up with economic or political programs that will feed millions will not gain us eternal life. We are justified by grace through faith (Romans 3:23-28). As Lutherans we are so fearful of being accused of works righteousness that we often go to the opposite extreme. We Lutherans just give lip service or an intellectual agreement to what Jesus calls us to do for the marginalized. Carl Braaten calls the passage about the separation of the sheep and the goats a warning and part of the dark side. "These dark sayings are uttered not so much to frighten sinners as to disturb the complacency of the righteous---- people with apparently the right

credentials. Listen to these words. They are meant for people like us. ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me’ (Matthew 15:8). ‘Not everyone who says, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven’ (Matthew 7:21). The New Testament is full of warnings of the spiritual danger of using the right words and correct ecclesiastical doctrines as a religious screen against the living word and will of God. These warnings are the penultimate Word of God. The ultimate verdict has fallen once and for all in the Christ of history, from the eternal future of God’s all-encompassing love.”²⁸³

Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes a similar point. “The only man who has the right to say he is justified by grace alone is the one who has left all to follow Christ. Such a man knows that such a call to discipleship is a gift of grace, and that the call is inseparable from the grace. But those who try to use this grace as a dispensation from following Christ are simply deceiving themselves.”²⁸⁴

One day we will stand before Jesus and how will we fare against the criteria set forth in Matthew 25? Did we feed the hungry? Did we ask why people are hungry and how we can make systematic change? Did we work with our church and other agencies to do more than put band-aids on the problems? Did we give sacrificially, that means help till it pinched? Or did we just give away stuff we didn’t want anymore to salve our conscience?

Well I know one time that you did feed Jesus when he was hungry, even though you did not realize it at the time. Remember the desperate and hungry pregnant woman on bed rest with two children to feed and going to bed hungry herself. Here is the rest of

²⁸² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1954), 52.

²⁸³ Carl E. Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 84.

her story. At the end of her rope, hungry and with her income slashed, her prayers were answered. Here are her words. “The Lord spoke to my heart to call DSS and they referred me to you all, the Loaves and Fishes Food Bank. God made a way for us through your generous giving and now we don’t have to worry. I praise God for this blessing and I know you will receive it back 100 times over.” ²⁸⁵

You helped a woman trapped by circumstances. We are all trapped by circumstances. Jesus is calling us to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked and to work for justice because of our relationship with him. When we engage in acts of compassion we are called out of ourselves and our circumstances. There is an intrinsic joy in the very activity of doing acts of compassion in Jesus name. We feed the hungry and clothe the naked not to earn our salvation but in response to the free gift of our salvation through Jesus Christ. We do acts of compassion by God’s grace and in gratitude for what God has done for us in Jesus.

Amen

²⁸⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1957), 45.

²⁸⁵ “A Testimonial From a Client”, *Fishnet*, Summer 2006,1.

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